ALL STORIES NEW . . . NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
SECOND JULY NUMBER

FEATURING
STAMPEDE VALLEY
by J. L. Bouma

RENEGADE'S GIRL
by Walker A. Tompkins

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LOSE WEIGHT Where It Shows Most REDUCE MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

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Spot Reducer

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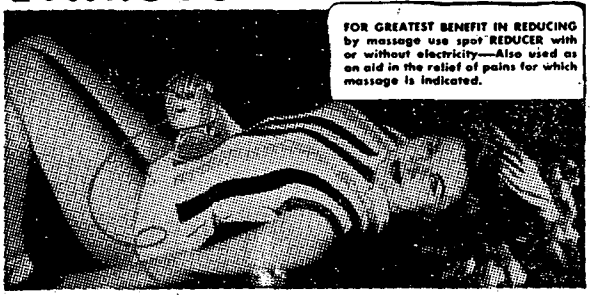
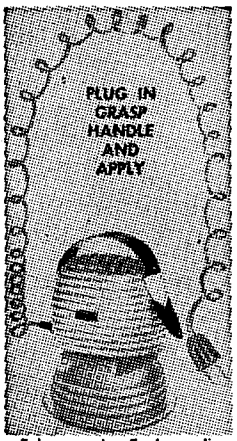


FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN REDUCING by massage use spot REDUCER with or without electricity—Also used as an aid in the relief of pains for which massage is indicated.



Take pounds off—keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and turkish baths—MASSAGE!

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When you use the Spot Reducer, it's almost like having your own private masseur at home. It's fun reducing this way! It not only helps you reduce and keep slim—but also aids in the relief of those types of aches and pains—and tired nerves that can be helped by massage! The Spot Reducer is handsomely made of light weight aluminum and rubber and truly a beautiful invention you will be thankful you own. AC 110 volts. Underwriters Laboratory approved.

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TRY THE SPOT REDUCER 10 DAYS FREE IN YOUR OWN HOME!

Mail this coupon with only $1 for your Spot Reducer on approval. Pay postman $8.95 plus delivery—or send $9.95 (full price) and we ship postage prepaid. Use it for ten days in your own home. Then if not delighted return Spot Reducer for full purchase price refund. Don't delay! You have nothing to lose—except ugly, embarrassing, undesirable pounds of FAT. MAIL COUPON now!

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Please send me the Spot Reducer for 10 days trial period. I enclose $1. Upon arrival I will pay postman only $8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return SPOT REDUCER within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

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31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND
JULY NUMBER

July 15, 1955
Volume 192, No. 4

RANCH ROMANCES

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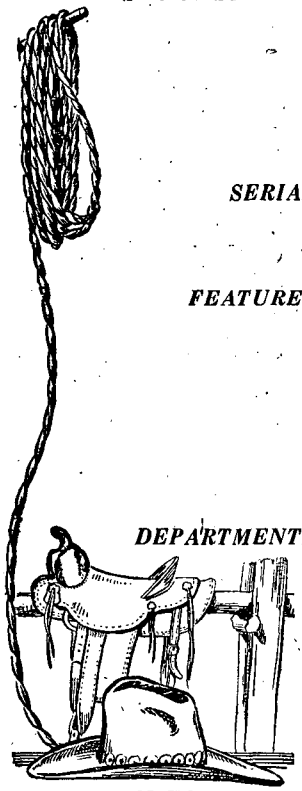

HELEN TONO
Editor

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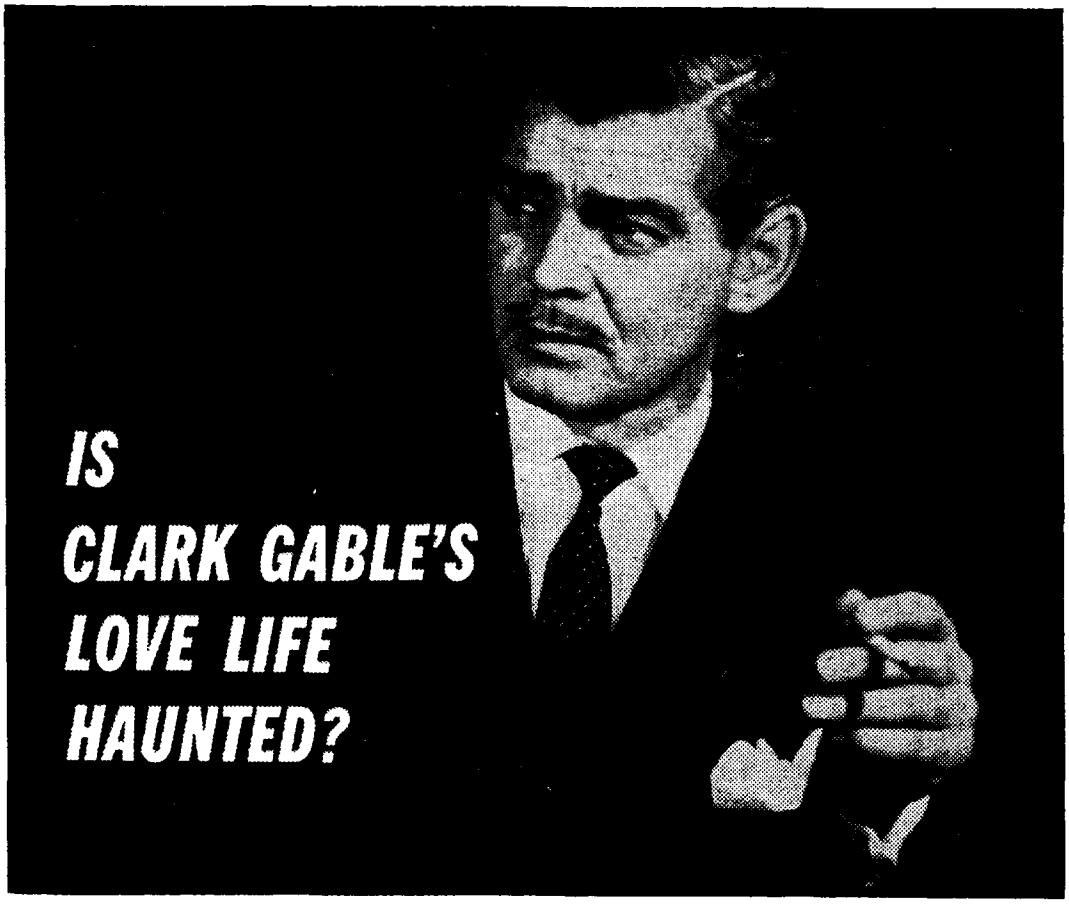

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Come One, Come All

Dear Editor:

I'd love to get my name in Our Air Mail. I love to write, and I'll answer all letters, from young or old, servicemen and women—in fact, anybody from anywhere. I'm 21 years old, have black hair and brown eyes, am 5'6½" tall, and weigh 109 lbs.

VIOLA BALL

Maggie
North Carolina

Round Up Some Mail

Dear Editor:

I'd like to join the RANCH ROMANCES Air Mail column. I'm a young man of 25, and live with my father and mother in the round-up city of Pendleton. I am 6 feet tall, have brown eyes and black curly hair. I love to write letters, and will answer all mail.

ERNEST GREEN

1824 S.E. Byers
Pendleton, Oregon.

Hillbilly from Arkansas

Dear Editor:

How about some pen pals for a lonesome hillbilly from Arkansas? I'm 5'6", weigh 111 lbs., am 16 years old, and have blonde hair and hazel eyes. I like reading, parties, movies, and especially music—popular and hillbilly songs. I am a sophomore in high school. Here's hoping I hear from many nice people.

DELORES TAYLOR

Barber, Arkansas
Route 1

Trying Again

Dear Editor:

I'm 12 years old and have light brown hair and brown eyes. I like all sports, especially fishing. This is my second try for pen pals so, some boy or girl between the ages of 12 to 15, please answer it. I'd especially like to hear from boys.

MARY REA LEACH

Box 46A
Craigmont, Idaho

Calling Other States

Dear Editor:

This is my first letter to the Air Mail column, and I hope it will do. I would like to hear from people in other states. I'm 26 years old, have red hair, and weigh 160 lbs. I like outdoor sports and like to meet people.

HUEY P. SHELTON

c/o Clyde Bates
Titusville, Florida

Mysterious Miss

Dear Editor:

I have read RANCH ROMANCES for nearly eight years—but I won't tell my age, because I like to be mysterious. I'd like to hear from anyone who will correspond with a lonely miss—no limit on race, color, sex or age. I'd like a picture of any-

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

one who writes. I have light brown wavy hair, blue-gray eyes, and am 5' 5" tall.

DIXIE LEE HANKS

Route 4
Unionville, Mo.

Young at Heart

Dear Editor:

I am 5' 11" tall, weigh 150 lbs., have brown hair and blue eyes, and am young minded. I'm single, and I play the piano and love dancing. I'll be glad to get letters, especially from good-looking girls.

CHARLES F. ASKINS

733 Oak Street
Lima, O.

Ridin' Gal

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely farm girl, 5' 7" tall, weighing 160 lbs., with brown hair and blue eyes. I'm 14 years old. My hobby is horseback riding, and I have my own horse. I hope my letter is printed, because I'll be waiting to hear from you boys and girls of all ages.

VERA SIMPSON

Box 32
Snowflake, Ariz.

Long and Fast

Dear Editor:

I'm a young man of 30, 5' 8" tall, weighing 130 lbs., with brown hair and blue eyes. My interests include reading, swimming, dancing, writing letters, traveling, and collecting phonograph records. I'm a factory worker. I would like to hear from anyone of any age, especially those who are handicapped or shut-ins. All will receive a long and fast reply.

GEORGE EVANS

Box 245
Elyria, O.

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Fourth Try

Dear Editor:

I've tried four times to get my name in the Air Mail column, so I'm hoping you will notice me this time. I'm 21, 5' 5" tall, weigh 130 lbs., have red hair and green eyes. I work as a model or dancer. Come on, all you men from 21 and up, please write.

ROSE MARY LA RUE
c/o General Delivery
Toledo, O.

Lassies from Scotland

Dear Editor:

Would any of your readers be interested in writing to some lassies from Scotland? We are all the same age—21—and you can write to all of us at the same address. We'll answer any letters we receive, and would like to get pictures when you write.

EMILY CRESSAN
SADIE CAMPBELL
FRANCES HENRY
P. 1 Wishaw Hospital
Dunsdale Road
Wishaw, Lanarkshire
Scotland

A Pair of Farm Girls

Dear Editor:

Could you possibly find room on your wonderful page for my letter? I am a farm girl from Nova Scotia, and would love to hear from anyone who cares to write. I am 16, 5' 1" tall, weigh 120 lbs., and have brown hair and green eyes. I would especially like to hear from anyone who is in the Air Force (including girls) as I hope to join up as soon as I'm old enough. My friend, Beverly Weir, who is 12 years old, would also like to hear from anyone who cares to write. She has brown hair and dark brown eyes. We both like the same pastimes—dancing, skating, reading, and listening to the radio. Beverly's address is the same as mine.

ANNE SPINNEY
Black River, Kings County
Nova Scotia, Canada

Pen Pals From Near

Dear Editor:

I wonder if I could hear from pen pals living near me, and around my own age. If I could get my name published in your magazine it would make me happy. I am 20 years old, 5.'6", weigh 140 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes.

A/3c JIMMY McCARROLL
AF 14545684, Box 1535
Lackland A. F. B.
San Antonio, Tex.

Pen Pals From Far

Dear Editor:

As I lead a very uneventful life, I thought I'd like some pen pals in the services. My statistics are: age, 20; height, 5'9"; weight, 133 lbs.; coloring, hair nearly black, eyes brown, and a sun-tanned complexion. My hobbies include writing, dancing, cooking, and sewing. I also follow all sports. Letters need not be from all males, but I would like a photo with the first letter if possible.

DAWN KADER
22 Constable Street
Ferrydew Park
South Aust., Australia

Likes Pretty Girls

Dear Editor:

This is my second try to get into "Our Air Mail." I would like to hear from pretty girls all over the world, from 14 to 18. I am a junior in high school and am 17 years old. I stand 6'2", and weigh 185 lbs. Come on, all you girls, drop me a line. I'll gladly exchange pictures.

TOM BROWN
Box 108
Santa Rosa, New Mex.

Needs a Friend

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to get pen pals. My mother passed away in December, and I feel as if my anchor is gone. I would welcome letters from either men or women, and will answer all. I am a divorcee in my forties, am 4'11", have brown hair and eyes, and weigh 120 lbs. Here's hoping many of you hear my plea.

MRS. WINIFRED JONES
P. O. 617
Gary, Ind.

College Man

This is my third try to join your wonderful "Our Air Mail." Hope I make it this time. I'm a 29-year-old Air Force veteran, single, 6' tall, weighing 150 lbs., with brown hair and brown eyes. I like hunting, fishing, and writing letters. I'm now in college, and am an ex-rancher. I'll answer all letters—but the ones with pictures first.

JIM LEONBERGER
Box 46
Ontario, Calif.

California Fire

Dear Editor:

I want to thank all the nice readers who answered my "Air Mail" letter several months ago. I made many nice friends but, due to a fire at my home, all my letters were burned. I am the vet who lives alone with his dog, and I am lonesome for mail and sincere friendship. So you readers who have written before—please write to me again.

JOE DMOWSKI
1179½ No. Commonwealth Ave.
Los Angeles, Calif.

Real Dude

Dear Editor:

I'm a girl 15 years old, with reddish blonde hair, 5'2½" tall. I live on a dude ranch, and horseback riding is my favorite pastime. I will answer all letters, so come on, kids, how about some mail?

MARY KIPP
Box G
Creede, Colo.

(Continued on page 113)

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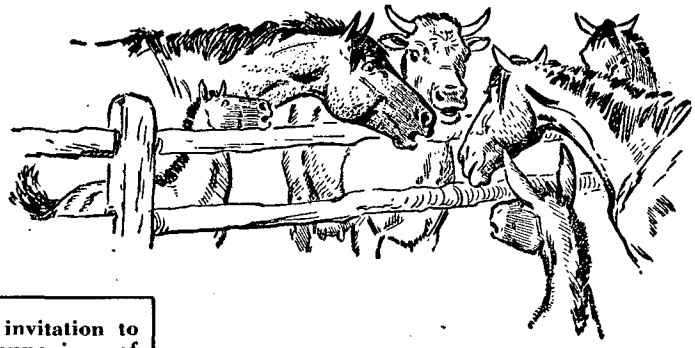
TRAIL DUST



PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

THERE'S a holdup man in Cincinnati, Ohio, who can really claim his trouble with the law is the result of bad advice. While sticking up a bank, he got panicky and asked for a quick way out. His victims pointed the way—into a closet where the would-be bandit was locked up until the police arrived.

A FINANCE company man came all the way from Joplin, Mo., to Houston, Tex., to repossess an auto. He couldn't find it, wired back for a better address, got it—Houston, Mo.

THE WINNER of an automobile in a Fort Worth, Tex., traffic safety slogan contest won't be around to collect his prize for some time. He's been detained in jail, where he's serving a 20-year robbery sentence.

BOYS will try anything to escape going to school, as proved by the story told to Detroit, Mich., police by a couple of youngsters. The kids claimed that a "genuine time bomb with wires all over and a ticking noise inside" had been hidden in their school. Several hours of excited searching later, the boys confessed to having over-active imaginations.

A PHOENIX, Ariz., woman was run over by a greyhound, but her injuries were slight. The greyhound was a dog, not a bus.

THE HEAT was so intense in Kansas City, Kans., recently that a weather beacon, which indicates weather changes by flashing colored lights, flipped its lid—or switch—and began flashing in quick succession the signs for fair weather, cloudy skies, rain, and snow.

IN SYLMAR, Calif., a heavy truck roared out of control, smashed through a billboard, hit three unoccupied cars, then overturned. The billboard that had been smashed read: "Next time take the train."

AN EXASPERATED Ottawa, Ont., driver, finding his parked car wedged between two others, finally gave up trying to move it and left a note on one of the offending cars reading, "I took a bus." Next day he found a 25-cent coin on his windshield, with a note saying that it was for his carfare.

ILLITERATE thugs have broken into a Los Angeles, Calif., safe three times, in spite of a sign posted near it which says, "It costs $125 to repair this safe after you safecrackers work it over. It contains only $30 or $40. So have a heart and try someplace worthwhile."

A SAN PEDRO, Calif., judge saw a hopeful trend in the case of two drunk drivers whose autos collided. "If all drinking people run into each other instead of some innocent person, it may be the solution of one of our worst traffic problems," he said.

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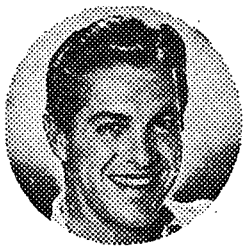
RANCH FLICKER TALK



by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

STRANGER ON HORSEBACK

"Judge" Joel McCrea backs up his law-making with courage and a quick trigger finger, in United Artists' unusual new Western

JOEL McCREA has played so many parts in so many Westerns that I'd have bet it was impossible for him to play something new in a Western. But in *Stranger on Horseback*, his latest movie for United Artists release, he plays a judge.

This is really a twist because, as Western fans know, all judges are middle-aged or elderly duffers. Sometimes they're lovable and smart; sometimes they're villainous and sly. But in any Hollywood production we've seen up till now, they've absolutely never been handsome young men who ride into town to bring law and order with a gavel.

Luckily for the plot and the excitement, this judge finds as much use for his sixgun as for his copy of Blackstone. The story told in this particular movie proves that there are times when the law must be backed up by a courageous heart and a trigger-quick hand.

Co-starring with Joel in *Stranger on Horseback* is an actress who might seem an odd choice for a cowgirl part—until you've seen her play it.

She is Miroslava, whose real life story is as exciting as any movie. She never remembers—except in nightmares—her escape from Czechoslovakia with her mother and father, just after it was taken by Hitler.

After several hairbreadth escapes, they arrived in Mexico City, where her father resumed his practice of medicine and Miroslava looked to the future and began to study for the theater.

Five years later she began a career that was to make her the idol of Spanish movie fans. She made 25 films, playing everything from comedy to tragedy. She has no preference for one or the other. All she wants is parts "with a little sex in them."

This is her second part in English, which she speaks without an accent—it's one of the half-dozen languages her early education and her international background have taught her to speak fluently. Her American debut was in *The Brave Bulls*.

"Now," she told me with a grin, "I understand what people mean by Hollywood type-

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casting. If I am a success in a story about bulls, why naturally, they will next cast me in a story about cows, or at least one that deals with cowboys."

Kevin McCarthy, a young actor who divides his time equally among movie, TV and theater jobs, told me he'd stay in Hollywood if he could get more parts like Tom Bannerman in *Stranger on Horseback*.

He's the pivotal character in the fight for justice in a town named for his father, a powerful rancher. It is the judge's task to arrest him in spite of his father's opposition, and then to see that he gets a fair trial among small ranchers who hate the name of Bannerman.

The movie was made in color, on location in Arizona, and all concerned were surprised to discover how lacking in hardships the location trip was.

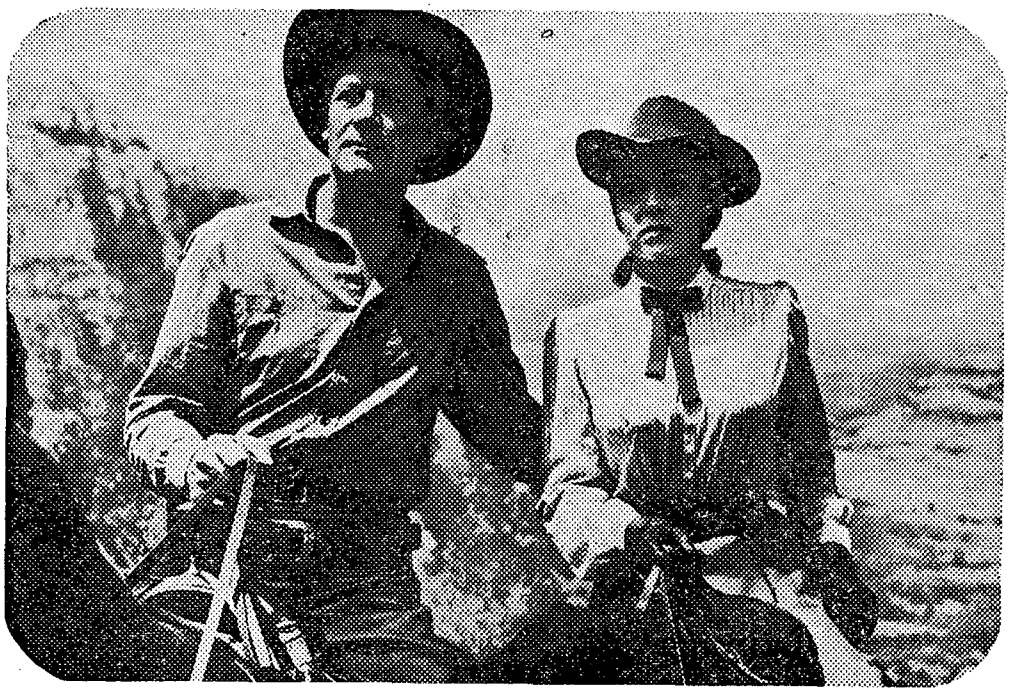
"We really had fun," Miroslava told me. "I was astonished to find out how comfortable I could be in a tent, because I'm not the camping-out type."

Kevin gave all the credit for the smoothness and the pleasure of making *Stranger on Horseback* to Joel. "You'd think, after all the Westerns he's made, the whole routine would get pretty boring to him. But he seemed just as interested, just as eager to do a good job as the greenest actor in the cast." Kevin grinned and added, "And I might just be talking about myself when I mention 'green' actors."

So I asked Joel, later on, whether his apparent enjoyment of movie-making was only an act for the benefit of his co-workers, or whether he really still gets a kick out of it.

"No, indeed," he said vehemently. "I love what I'm doing, and I want everyone to know it. You might have heard me say that, when I was about six years old, I decided two things: I was going to be a cowboy star like William S. Hart, and I was going to own a ranch.

"Well, I never changed my mind about wanting those two things, even after I got them."



Miroslava helps Joel McCrea escape an enemy ambush

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DENNIS MORGAN
He Wanted to Sing

RANCH FLICKER TALK

DENNIS MORGAN believes in being his own boss. He'd rather trust his own judgment in running his career than a movie studio's, and he has plenty of reason to feel that way.

His early days in Hollywood, when he was under contract to one picture company after another, were a comedy of errors. He was first signed by MGM as a singer, using his own name, Stanley Morner. There he played a succession of bit parts, and the closest he came to singing was when he mouthed words previously recorded by Allan Jones.

After three years Metro and Morner parted company, and he tried his luck at Paramount. His name was changed to Richard Stanley, which it remained for just a year and appeared only once among the screen credits. In this case he played a nearly speechless villain.

Next Warners offered a contract, agreeing to give the young hopeful at least one chance to exercise his vocal chords. This studio changed his name to Dennis Morgan, and gave him one song to sing. Three pictures later Dennis was starring in a Technicolor production of *Desert Song*.

"Of course, my success as a singer meant that I never got a chance to do anything *but* sing," says Dennis. "I like variety, though, which is why it's such fun to free-lance—to be under contract to nobody."

I suspect that Dennis likes being his own boss for another reason. He's a country boy at heart—from Prentice, Wis.—and he needs plenty of leisure time for his hobby of being a gentleman farmer.

The Morgans live on a four-acre estate, which is mostly woods, except for the swimming pool. The only wild life on the place is a flock of ducks and some stately peacocks. So there's some question about whether Dennis is really a farmer, but there's absolutely no question about whether he's a gentleman, in the best sense of the word.

He has been a devoted husband ever since he married his college sweetheart almost 22 years ago. He's also a fond father, who can be stern, when necessary, to his three children —Stanley, now 20; Kristin, 17; and James, 12.

Dennis is one of the best-liked people in Hollywood. Not only is he admired for his good work—singing in the choir, meeting with the Boys' Club—he's also fun to be with.

Once you've been invited to his house on a Sunday afternoon, you'll want to come back every Sunday—and some people do. It's a very informal gathering. If you want activity, you can swim in the pool or try your hand at archery. If you're lazy, you can listen to music and talk. And when you're hungry—well, the buffet is right there, and you help yourself.

"Nowadays," Dennis told me, at one of these parties, "I just work when I have to."

But I suspect that when Dennis makes a TV appearance, or, as he recently did, signs for two pictures with Columbia, the Morgans don't really need the money. It's just that no actor can stay away from the stage or the camera for very long.

Dennis got a great kick out of his latest, which was a Technicolor Western for Columbia, *The Gun That Won the West*. He doesn't sing a note, but whether he performs vocally or not doesn't worry him any more, now that he's proved that he can do it. He does enjoy playing a man of action. He has just the physique for rough stuff, being six feet two and 195 pounds.

In school he was a four-letter man—football, baseball, basketball and track. And he keeps in shape these days on the golf course. At least once a year he makes a trip to fish in the Wisconsin lakes of his boyhood.

Even at the studio Dennis seems relaxed and contented. You can look at him and read his mind. "It's a great life—especially if you're your own boss."

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Warner Bros.

Dennis's early career in Hollywood was a comedy of errors

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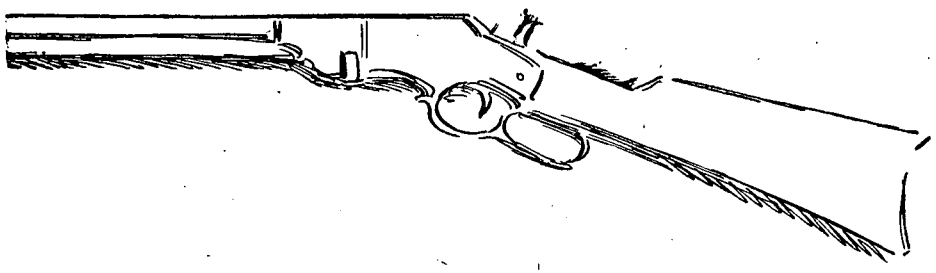

WEBB WAS READY to fight the whole Anchor crew if that would help Linda . . . but it meant he'd have to cross his best friend

THEY topped the long ridge and saw Maynard's ranch buildings near the swirling stream. A rider was just leaving the yard.

Charlie Denton stopped his horse and said heavily, "That's Carlson. Now why the hell would he be calling on Maynard? Are they joining forces? I'll have to have a talk with that man!"

Sycamore Sorley grinned evilly at Webb Freeman. He nudged his head at Charlie Denton as though he wanted Webb to be sure not to miss any of this. Webb acted as if he didn't notice. He could understand why Sycamore admired Charlie Denton, Anchor's owner, but it annoyed him just the same.

Charlie Denton's cold stare was fixed on the rider. He was a big man, and his features were weathered and stony. But in spite of that, he had a hearty cheerfulness that spoke of confidence and pride.

VALLEY

by J. L. BOUMA

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A short laugh rumbled in his chest as he glanced at Bitter Root, the little man who followed him around like a shadow. "You'd think he'd know better."

Bitter Root didn't answer, a fact that didn't surprise Webb. A slovenly figure with pale, restless eyes, he sat hunched forward, gloved hands on the pommel of his saddle. During the short time Webb had been an Anchor man, he hadn't heard Bitter Root speak more than three words at a stretch.

"I'm reasonable enough and can take just about anything," Charlie Denton said. Now he was looking at Webb. "But if there's one thing I can't stand, it's a man who plots behind my back."

That was understandable and needed no comment, Webb thought. On the other hand, Denton wasn't exactly a square-shooter himself, especially when it came to getting what he wanted. But that was supposed to be something else again.

Webb looked down the slope at the river glittering in the pale sunlight, and to the reaches beyond where shaggy grass rippled in the sweeping wind. Cloud shadows mottled the land, and thunderheads drifted sluggishly above the distant mountains. The chill of fall was in the air, and it numbed Webb's face.

His was an ordinary young man's face, perhaps a little bonier than most. At twenty, he wore a quiet air of certainty that he did not always feel. Still, it was a quality that made him look older than his friend Sycamore, who had a three-year edge on him.

The rider they were watching had turned out of sight on the valley road. Bitter Root peeled the pigskin glove from his right hand and tucked the glove neatly under his belt. His smooth, pale fingers touched the butt of his Navy Colt, then reached for the reins.

CHARLIE DENTON looked at Sycamore. "How do you feel, you ugly redhead? You primed for trouble?"

Sycamore grinned back. "Sure thing, boss."

"Well, it's doubtful that there'll be any," Charlie Denton said, "but if there is, stay out of it. I don't want you hurt."

At least Denton's concern for Sycamore was honest, Webb thought. It bordered on a father-and-son relationship. Charlie Denton said, "Let's ride," and put his black gelding down the slope.

Sycamore grinned at Webb. "Isn't this something?" he sang out happily, and spurred his horse forward.

Webb saw nothing to get excited about, but then he didn't know why they were calling on Maynard. Well, it was Denton's show, and it was Denton who paid the wages. A man couldn't argue against that. You weren't supposed to ask the why or wherefore, but to keep your curiosity to yourself.

Webb wondered why Denton had wanted him along in the first place. It seemed sort of odd that the rancher had pulled him from gathering strays to be in on this business with Maynard.

They hit the bottoms and trotted forward. Sycamore lifted his gun clear of its holster and let it slide back. His greenish eyes snapped fire as he winked at Webb.

"Now we're liable to see some fireworks."

Webb grunted.

"If you think Charlie doesn't pack a lot of weight in the valley, you got another think coming."

Webb grunted a second time, and Sycamore laughed.

"You devil! There are times when I don't know what to make of you."

That worked both ways, Webb thought. You could never tell about the blind spots in a man. Sycamore had a reckless streak in him and was a heller in a fight, but Webb had never known him to act eager-to-please the way he did around Charlie Denton.

Webb supposed it was because Denton'd had a hand in raising Sycamore. But even so, it didn't follow that the redhead had to wag his tail every time Denton opened his mouth.

Webb and Sycamore had met in Arizona the year before, in a cow-town saloon. The redhead had one too many under his belt and was begging for trouble. Three local citizens were fixing to accommodate him, when Webb joined the party. He'd been forced to crack a couple of heads with the barrel of his gun before he got Sycamore out of there. They had drifted together ever since.

A man with a place to call home could still find reason to wander, if he needed to badly enough. Sycamore had blamed an itchy foot

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one day, while the next he would hint bright-eyed that he'd been in trouble on his home range and was waiting for it to blow over. Webb guessed that was about the size of it, for Charlie Denton used to mail the redhead fifty dollars each and every month they were together.

Each time it arrived, Sycamore would say, "I'm a he-wolf fixing to howl! Come along and help me spend it, Webb."

But Webb wasn't built to spend another man's money. He worked at odd jobs as they drifted. So did Sycamore, at least part of the time, for his fifty dollars didn't usually last very long. They were in Denver when the last letter arrived.

Sycamore was elated. "The wind has blown my troubles away, and I'm heading home! And you're coming with me, Webb. I'll get you work with the best boss you ever had. Yessir, Charlie Denton takes care of his own!"

A job was a job, and there wasn't much to choose between them. So it wasn't the thought of working for "the best boss he'd ever had," but the pull of unfamiliar country, that decided Webb. Besides, drifting alone took the heart out of a man, and Sycamore was likable company. A Texan by birth, Webb's folks had died when he was fifteen, and he'd been on his own ever since.

So they had headed north, and two months ago had dismounted stiffly from their weary horses in Anchor's yard. It was a far cry from Texas, but Webb hadn't minded. He liked the looks of this Wyoming country.

NOW they followed the road toward John Maynard's sprawling log house. It was set on a slight rise above the river, and most of the footage between was taken up by a flower and vegetable garden. A girl straightened in a patch of corn, her yellow dress a bright splash in the green blades. She watched them for a second, shielding her eyes with her hand, then walked swiftly toward the house.

A moment later, a lanky man appeared from a shed. He was followed by a shorter, huskier man. The latter said something and then crossed the yard at a half run, but the lanky man stayed where he was.

Webb frowned, not understanding any of this. Ranch country was friendly country as a rule, and a cheerful greeting would have been in order. He realized that Charlie Denton was not welcome here.

His eyes on the house, Charlie Denton said, "Got 'em guessing, that's for sure."

"You sure have, boss," Sycamore said.

As they stopped their horses, the door opened and John Maynard came out on the veranda to the edge of the steps. He stood with his legs spread, hands shoved in his pockets, a big, calm-eyed man with hair beginning to turn gray. His expression was neither friendly nor unfriendly as his gaze touched Webb and Sycamore, rested briefly on Bitter Root, then fastened on Denton.

"Well, I haven't seen you out this way for a spell," he said. "You're a long way from home, Denton."

There was no invitation to light and stretch, Webb noticed. He saw the lanky man ease in sight at the corner of the house, and noted that the fellow was unarmed. There was an odd little smile on his face as he looked on.

"Not too far," Charlie Denton said cheerfully. "How's it going, Maynard?"

"Making out," Maynard said. He turned his head and looked at the lanky man. "Get that harness fixed?"

"Working on it," the man drawled.

"Then keep at it until it's done," Maynard said shortly, and the fellow pulled a crooked grin and eased out of sight.

Maynard looked back at Charlie Denton. "What's on your mind?"

"You don't know, huh?" Charlie Denton's chuckle rumbled. "Playing it close to the vest as usual. But then that's the way I like it, when I do business with a man."

Maynard shook his head slowly. "I have no business with you, Denton." He turned his head briefly as the sound of voices from within the house drew his attention.

"Don't be too sure about that," Charlie Denton said in a harder voice. "I'm making you the same offer I made before. I'm running double the beef I ran last year, Maynard, and I need your grass and water. You know I bought Hargrove out."

Maynard gave a short laugh. "Hargrove had a little bad luck, didn't he?"

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"What are you talking about?" Charlie Denton demanded in his roughest voice.

"About his house burning down," Maynard said. "And then the way he lost his herd on the drive to railhead last fall. Did anyone ever find out who stampeded his beef into that canyon?"

Charlie Denton looked hard at Maynard. "Not that I know of. But then it's a long hundred miles through rough country to railhead, and a lot can happen on the way." He grinned thinly. "I'm spreading out, Maynard. I made Carlson the same offer I made you, and I'm sure he'll sell."

He broke off as a girl slipped through the half-open door. It was Linda Maynard. Webb had seen her in town a few times, but had never spoken to her. She was about eighteen, slim and straight as a willow, with hair the color of honey. Her serious eyes met Webb's for an instant, and he automatically touched the brim of his hat, feeling a flush mount his face, for her calm and steady gaze was a disconcerting thing.

Maynard looked at her as though he meant to tell her to go back inside, but he didn't. He looked at Charlie Denton again, and said in an annoyed way, "You offered to buy me out and I said no. That should have been enough, but it seems it wasn't. What does it take to make you understand that I mean what I say?"

WEBB FREEMAN LINDA MAYNARD

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"The same thing that'll make you understand that I mean business," Charlie Denton said. "So don't make it tough on yourself."

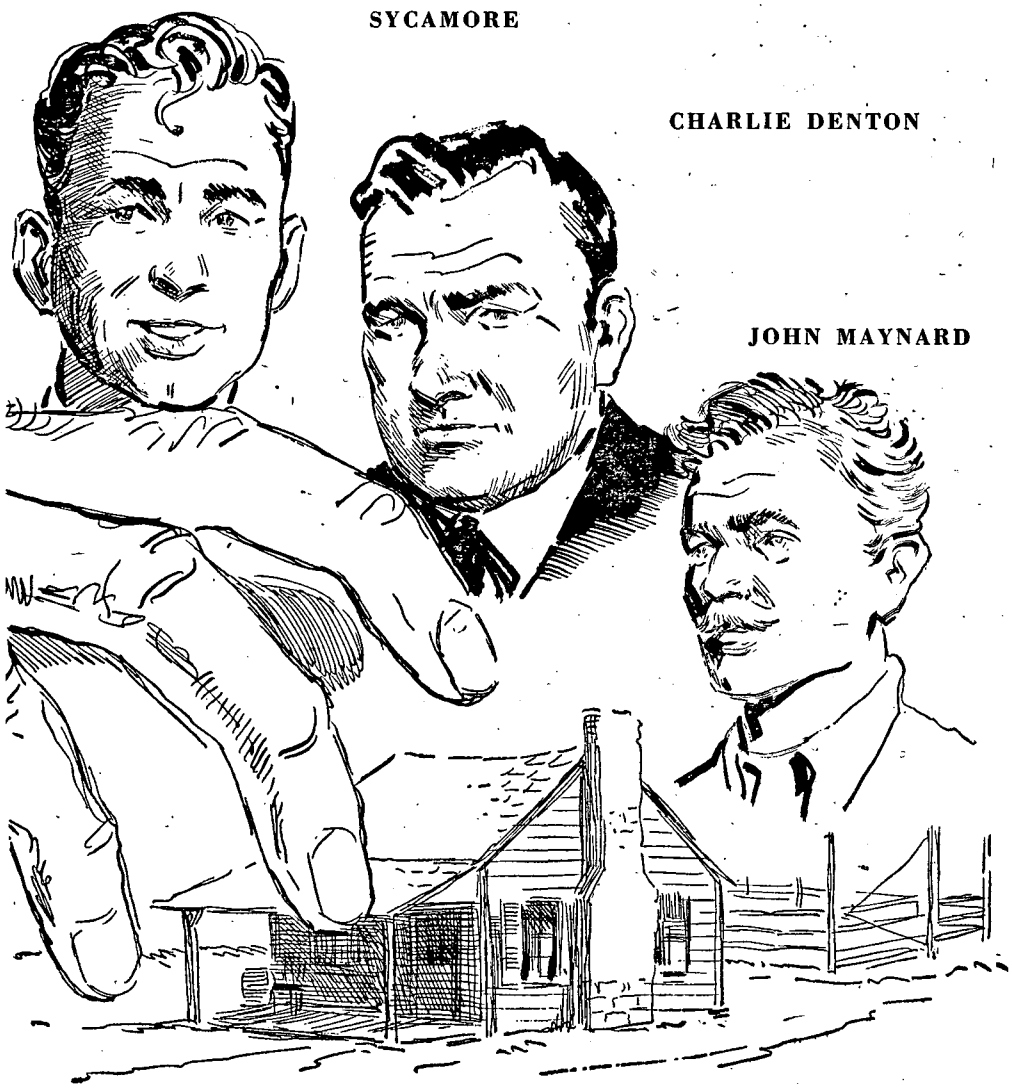
MAYNARD shook his head in a puzzled way. "You force yourself on a man, Denton. But I reckon we both know what you're getting at." His voice toughened. "Don't push too hard, Denton. And don't ever again come here with your hired guns and try to buffalo me into selling out. I might run a small outfit in comparison to Anchor, but I'll still give you a fight."

"Oh?" Charlie Denton said softly. "You and Carlson?"

"What he does is his business." Maynard gave a curt nod and turned to enter the house, but Charlie Denton's voice stopped him.

"Don't make the mistake of bucking heads with me, Maynard," he said harshly, "because if you do I'll run you and yours out of the valley."

Maynard wheeled back and came down the steps. "Who the hell do you think you are, coming here and threatening me?" The girl came down and took his arm, said something



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in a soft voice, but he shook her off. "Get in the house." He continued to look up at Charlie Denton, a show of temper on his face. "Clear out fast, and don't come back. Don't ever come back, you hear me?"

Charlie Denton glanced at the girl in the doorway. She stood as though blocking it, and Webb saw the husky blond young man behind her, saw an outraged face and the barrel of a rifle. He looked quickly at Charlie Denton, just as the rancher shot Bitter Root a brief glance that was pregnant with meaning.

John Maynard didn't appear to notice this quick by-play. He took a step back, as Charlie Denton moved his horse forward and leaned from the saddle.

"No man tells me to clear out!" Cords stood out in Denton's neck.

He again forced Maynard to back a step, and the graying rancher gave a grunt of rage, grabbed hold of the bridle near the bit, and swung the black's head away from the house.

Charlie Denton roared, "No you don't!" He slipped his left boot from the stirrup and kicked out at Maynard, catching him in the chest.

Quick anger flared through Webb. Charlie Denton was deliberately seeking trouble, and Webb resented having to be part of it.

The girl cried out, "Bob! No, Bob!" as the husky young man brushed past her, the rifle at his hip, his outraged eyes and taut mouth expressing his rage.

He shouted, "Get the hell off our place!" and brought the rifle to bear on Charlie Denton.

As he did so, Bitter Root uttered a short grunt and went for his gun. Webb, not knowing what to expect, had been watching Bitter Root from the corner of his eye, and now he jumped his horse forward and drove into Bitter Root's mount just as the small man fired.

The shot roared, and the front window of the log house splintered. The sound of that froze them all momentarily. Bitter Root's eyes, cold and merciless as a cat's, fastened on Webb.

He said, "Damn fool!"

Charlie Denton said sharply, "Put that gun away!"

Bitter Root swore softly, holstered his gun, and Maynard, a hand pressed against his chest, turned to Bob and said, "Get inside. You too, Linda. And stay there!" He glanced briefly at the shattered window, then gave Webb a steady look before turning his gaze on Bitter Root. In a low, hard voice he said, "If you had hit my son I'd have killed you. Now get out!"

"Your kid asked for it," Charlie Denton said shortly. "The next time he'll know better than to point a gun at me."

"If anything happens to him because of this," Maynard said, "I'll hold you responsible."

Charlie Denton laughed. "Got the wind up, huh? All right, Maynard. But just remember that any trouble that comes out of this will be of your own making. My offer to you is still open. Next week I withdraw it, and from then on you'd better walk damn soft around Anchor, or take the consequences." As he turned his horse, his eyes raked Webb's face. "Let's go."

Webb turned his own horse and saw Linda watching him from the doorway. And he was suddenly glad of what he had done, and wished he could make some sort of sign to tell her so.

He trotted stirrup to stirrup with Sycamore, who said softly and urgently, "What made you do a fool thing like that, Webb? Young Maynard had a gun on the boss, didn't he? He might've shot the boss." He looked at Webb in a reproachful way, as though his friend had let him down.

"I doubt it," Webb said shortly.

"If I ever catch that kid in town, he'll hear from me," Sycamore said. "Holding a gun on the boss!"

Webb said nothing. Sycamore's concern for Denton left him cold, especially since the rancher had started the trouble. Had he crowded Maynard deliberately, hoping the son would jump in and give Bitter Root a chance to kill him? Webb wasn't sure, but it was a disturbing thought just the same.

CHARLIE DENTON and Bitter Root waited where the lane met the road. A tight grin creased the rancher's brown cheeks. "A good thing you work for me, else

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old Bitter Root here would have put a bullet in you. Don't you know better than to jump a man when he's about to pull a gun?"

Webb shrugged, and Sycamore said gruffly, "Webb's all right, boss. He just spooked a little, that's all."

"He sure as hell did something," Charlie Denton said, still eyeing Webb. "But I'm just as glad there was no killing, especially in front of that girl. Isn't that right, Bitter Root?"

Bitter Root's eyes dug at Webb's face. "Don't ever cross me again, kid."

Webb felt a quick resentment. "You had no business taking a shot at him."

"You're a fool."

"Enough of that," Charlie Denton said. "Maynard got in my craw, telling me to clear out," he added cheerfully, and grinned at Webb. "The Texan in me stands up on its hind legs and howls whenever a man pushes me around. I guess you've heard that I was Texas born and Texas raised."

Webb didn't know how to take Denton. The rancher hated to be pushed around, but at the same time he did a lot of pushing of his own. Webb had expected to have his ears blistered for stopping Bitter Root, and instead Denton made out that he was glad of what had happened. It gave Webb a feeling of uncertainty.

"My old man had a small ranch," Charlie Denton went on. "When I was twelve I was doing a man's work, with my rifle never out of reach. If the Injuns didn't raid you, then you could expect rustlers. I was sixteen when the war started, and I joined up." He looked at Webb with narrowed eyes. "And I wouldn't be much of a man if I ever forgot what happened while I was away at the fighting."

Webb thought Charlie Denton expected a comment on that, but he didn't make one.

"My old man died, and my two brothers were killed at Bull Run. Meanwhile the worthless trash that stayed home robbed us blind, and a big outfit moved in and took over our place when the old man died. I came back without a dime to my name, figuring to take over, but they laughed at me. Well, that taught me a lesson I never forgot, and don't mean to forget, ever."

The word had come with slow rage. Webb felt uncomfortable; he wondered why Denton had bothered to tell him all this.

"Get to be top man, and to hell with the rest of it," Charlie Denton went on softly. "Get big enough so that they're afraid of you, and you'll never have to worry. That's the lesson I learned, and I've been practising it ever since."

"My daddy worked for the boss when he first got here," Sycamore put in. "That was while I was back in Kansas living with kinfolk."

"I cut a herd of mavericks out of the brush, sold enough to hire a couple of riders, and pushed the rest of those ugly longhorns north to this valley. There was no town to speak of, then—just a trading post, Dalton's saloon, and an eating place. For three years I lived in a soddy on beans and venison. Come spring and fall, I'd drive a few beef to Laramie and trade for supplies. Then a couple of outfits moved in along the Ritters, and a flock of emigrants settled in the Rincon hills, so that before we knew it we had a town."

He grinned fondly at Sycamore, then said to Webb, "Sycamore's old man went to work for me in '71, and a year later he sent for his son. The kid was sassy and didn't know tee from taw, but we straightened him out. He can still find more trouble than the average man, though. That last ruckus he got in almost landed him in jail, and it would have if I hadn't gotten him out of the country."

"You sure do take care of your people, boss," Sycamore said. "It's a fact, Webb. Treat the boss right and he'll take care of you."

The statement annoyed Webb. Treat me right and I'll treat you right was one thing, but this business of being taken care of was not something a man could accept with easy grace.

"When the boss takes on a man he'll back him to the last inch," Sycamore said. "Isn't that so, boss?"

Charlie Denton grunted. "If you want to know who runs things in this valley, I'll tell you." He tapped his chest. "I run 'em, and don't let anybody ever tell you different. I've kept the squatters out, and I've stretched the

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neck of every rustler I ever got my hands on. There are some folks that don't like the way I run my business, and I say to hell with them! Those that don't get in my way, I let alone. But those that cross me—" He broke off and gave Webb a calculating look.

It nettled Webb. Denton was putting on a show for his benefit, probably because of what had happened at Maynard's place, Webb thought. He sensed that if it weren't for the fact that he and Sycamore were friends, Denton would have fired him for interfering with Bitter Root.

The rancher had probably wanted him along in order to test him. Now his calculating look said he had doubts about Webb, but was still willing to take a chance on him because of Sycamore.

AT LEAST there was no doubt about one thing: Denton was a man who meant to have his own way, come hell or high water. And Webb had to admit the rancher looked after his men, the way he had looked after Sycamore. That kind of loyalty demanded loyalty in return, Webb thought. Nothing wrong with that, if it was honest and above board from both sides of the fence.

The trouble was that Webb couldn't dispel the feeling that Denton was not being honest so much as he was being shrewd. Disliked by his neighbors because of his pushing ways, he took pride in the kind of respect men like Sycamore showed him. To keep that respect, he backed them to the limit and put them in his debt.

The road turned past a slope where aspens were the golden yellow of autumn. Herefords grazed on the rolling green hills that ended at the foot of the towering Bitters. Denton stopped at the fork leading to his ranch, and his eyes were lively as they swept from Sycamore to Webb.

"It's been quite a day, and I think you boys better take the rest of it off and do a little howling in town. How about it?"

"That's great, boss," Sycamore said happily. "We haven't been to town all month."

"I might be in later myself." Charlie Denton took out a gold coin and flipped it at Webb. "That's in case you boys run short."

Webb caught the coin automatically, words of protest shaping in his mind, resentment crowding him. He realized he'd been right in his thoughts concerning Denton. The rancher had tossed the coin deliberately, in order to rouse a sense of obligation in Webb.

But before he could protest, Sycamore said, "A double eagle! Thanks, boss!"

"Don't think about it. Spend the money and have a good time." Charlie Denton gave a wave of his hand and rode away, Bitter Root at his side.

Sycamore looked after him and shook his head in an admiring way. "There's a man for you, Webb. He'd give you the shirt off his back!"

They swung their horses toward town. Webb felt the edges of the coin dig into his palm, and he reached over and said, "Here, you take it."

"He gave it to you to hold," Sycamore protested.

"I don't want it," Webb told him shortly. "I still got most of my last pay."

Sycamore gave him a long, frowning look. "What's eating you, anyhow?"

"I don't like to have a man throw money at me," Webb said. "Anyhow, he didn't need to give us twenty dollars. He pays us, doesn't he? Why should he throw us an extra twenty?"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Sycamore's jaw came out, and his eyes snapped. "You crossed him at Maynard's, and he didn't even blister your hide. And now you're growling because he hands us a double eagle. I never saw the like of it."

"What do you mean, I crossed him?"

"Jumping Bitter Root was the same as jumping the boss," Sycamore said angrily.

"Oh, wait a minute," Webb began.

"It's the plain truth." Sycamore nodded stubbornly. The anger had gone from his voice and he spoke in a serious way, like a man explaining something to a foolish boy. "You as much as took sides against the boss. I'm surprised at you, Webb."

Webb sighed. How blind could a man get? he thought. Sycamore couldn't see the real Charlie Denton. As far as he was concerned, the sun rose and set on the rancher, and

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nothing would make him believe different.

Sycamore grinned suddenly and leaned over to poke Webb in the ribs. "Forget it. You just haven't learned to know him yet, that's all. He'll do just about anything for you."

Sure, anything, Webb thought, as long as you see things his way and don't cross him.

"One thing, though," Sycamore said. "You'd better stay out of Bitter Root's reach for a while. He isn't a forgiving man, and it's best not to fool with him."

"You think he meant to kill Bob Maynard?" Webb spoke casually, knowing this was not really the question he wanted to ask. What he wanted to ask was whether Denton had meant that Bitter Root should kill young Maynard.

Sycamore looked blank for a second. "There you go again," he said finally. "What are you getting at? The boss said there might be trouble, didn't he?"

"I know."

"All right. In which case the man with his gun handy comes out on top, right?"

"I guess. But why does Denton want Maynard's place? From what I've seen, Anchor's got more than enough grass and water."

"That's the boss's business, isn't it? He was first dog in this valley, so why shouldn't he try to take over some of these two-bit spreads? He's got the right, and he pays a good price." He shook his head in a bewildered sort of way. "You sure are sour as grapes today. Come on, let's speed it up a little. I have a mighty sudden thirst." He spurred his horse into a lope.

Webb came even with him, thinking he might as well let the matter drop. Sycamore grinned at him as though nothing had happened, and a second later Webb felt an answering grin stretch his own mouth.

SHORTLY after Denton and his riders had gone, John Maynard identified the horseman coming down the back slope as Karl Carlson, and a little disgust stirred in him. Carlson had been on his way to town, but he had seen Denton and his men heading for the house and had circled and then waited until they had gone, afraid to face them in the open. Now he would want to know what had happened, and the answer would worry him no end.

There was worry in Maynard himself as he thought about Charlie Denton's visit. And the sore spot on his chest, where Denton's boot had caught him, brought a disturbing thought, which was that Denton had kicked him deliberately in order to draw Bob from the house and put him in reach of Bitter Root's gun.

Maynard did not like to think so, for he was not a man given to violence, and a good share of the anger he nursed now was directed against himself. He should not have lost his temper, for that was exactly what Denton had wanted him to do.

A man who lost control of his reason was at a disadvantage. That's what had happened. And because of it, Bob had come charging out of the house with a rifle, and Bitter Root would have killed him if it hadn't been for that new man on Denton's crew.

The thought sent a shudder through Maynard. He walked around to the front of the house, where Bob was measuring the broken window. The sun struck his scowling face as he turned to look at his father. He was nineteen, and he had a temper that he had not yet learned to control.

Now he said angrily, "We should have made him shell out for a new pane, damn him!"

"It doesn't matter," Maynard said. "Give Linda the measurements and she can pick up a new pane when she goes in for groceries."

"I'll be going in with her."

"Better not. Anchor might be in town, and there's no point in borrowing trouble."

Bob came down the stepladder. "I have to go in, and you know it. If Sis shows up alone, there's liable to be talk about my being afraid. I couldn't stand that. Anyhow, if we're in for a fight, we can't start out by hiding our faces."

Maynard knew his son was right. Charlie Denton usually got what he went after through fair means or foul, and once you backed away from him you were licked. It had happened to Hargrove, who had confided to Maynard that he suspected Denton

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of firing his house and stampeding his herd. But he'd been unable to prove it. In the end, a beaten man, he had sold out to the very one he suspected of ruining him.

Maynard said reluctantly, "All right, but don't wear a gun, you hear me? And stay away from the saloon."

He went around back to meet Carlson, and found Jake Monte sitting on his heels against the barn, smoking a cigarette. He said sharply, "Is this getting that harness fixed?"

Monte rose slowly to his feet. "From what happened a while ago," Monte drawled, "you're going to be in a mess of trouble, in which case you can count me out. I'll do my work as well as the next man, but I don't aim to buck Anchor for forty and found."

"Suits me," Maynard snapped. He had never cared for Monte, who was his lone hired hand, and this was as good a time as any to get rid of him. "I'll pay you off in the morning."

Karl Carlson reined past the barn, swung down, and tied his horse to a post. He crossed the yard in his scuffed boots, a fleshy man with protruding, yellowish eyes that reflected a deep-set fear. Each time Maynard looked into those eyes, he had a sense of shame and disgust.

Now he indicated the door with a gruff, "Come inside," and preceded Carlson into the kitchen.

Linda was there preparing dinner. She looked at her father with her serious eyes, and smiled slowly at Carlson. Bob came from the front and leaned in the doorway.

He said, "How soon before we eat?"

"Ten minutes," Linda said. "Will you stay, Karl?"

"I'll get something in town, thanks." Carlson turned to John Maynard. "What did he have to say?"

"He's going after me when he gets through with you," Maynard said dryly. "He figures you'll sell out."

Carlson gave a nervous laugh. "Did he ask what I was doing here?"

"Not exactly." Maynard hesitated.

Carlson bordered him to the south, and if Carlson sold out to Denton it would put Anchor on Maynard's boundary. And Maynard didn't want to see this happen. For a long time now he had tried to pour courage into Carlson, telling him that if they stood together they could keep Denton where he belonged.

This, then, was the crucial moment, and Maynard spoke bluntly of what had happened. The only answer was to fight Denton. And they couldn't expect help from the sheriff, with the county seat being a hundred miles away. Anyhow, Denton would be very careful not to break the law if he could help it.

"We'll just have to make a stand, Karl, and see what happens," Maynard said.

"If only there were more of us," Carlson said in that worried way. "I was thinking of asking Girth and Checkman."

"Forget 'em." Maynard spoke roughly. "They're too far north to worry about Denton crowding 'em—for the time being, anyhow. We're in this by ourselves."

Linda said, "Well, at least one of Denton's riders doesn't want to see a man shot in cold blood. Who is he, Dad?"

"Fellow named Webb Freeman. He drifted in with Sycamore a couple of months ago."

"He's probably no better than the rest of the hard-cases Denton has on his payroll," Carlson said.

"That's not fair," Linda said angrily. "I liked his looks. Besides, he saved Bob's life, and we have no right to judge him harshly."

John Maynard looked sharply at his daughter. She blushed and turned back to the stove. And it came to him how much she resembled her mother, whose death three years ago had torn a gap in his world. Often lately, when he looked at his daughter, he seemed to be seeing Helen. It was always a disconcerting experience.

"Well, I guess we might as well stick it out, then," Carlson said. "As long as we don't bother him, he may leave us alone."

Carlson's fears made him hope for the impossible, Maynard thought. Denton wouldn't leave them alone—he had just started in on them.

"We'll see," Maynard said.

"Then I'll be going," Carlson said. "It's getting so I feel safer in town than I do on

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the ranch," he added, and attempted a grin.

He said good-by and went out to his horse. The Maynards were silent a moment, as though Carlson's last remark still resounded in the room.

"Oh, man," Bob said finally, and shook his head at his father. Maynard shrugged. He watched Linda turn with a platter of steaming food.

"Call Jake," she said. "Tell him dinner's on the table."

AFTERNOON was no time for a man to fill up on whisky, Webb Freeman thought, and a saloon was a poor place to spend time while the sun was still up. He declined the bottle Sycamore offered, but the redhead poured a shot into his glass just the same.

He said cheerfully, "This is living, Webb. Better'n chasing cows through the brush."

Sycamore picked up his cards and scowled at them. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were bright, and he was not as cheerful as his words implied, for he had been losing steadily during the hour they had spent playing poker with a couple of mule skinners. The one to his right opened.

Sycamore swore, said angrily, "What does a man have to do to get a hand?" But he tossed his two bits into the pot just the same, and called for four cards.

Webb passed. Having run with Sycamore for so long, he knew the signs. The redhead was restless, torn between good cheer and belligerence, and a wrong word could set him going.

Webb himself didn't feel right exactly. The game was beginning to bore him, and his mind kept jumping back to a girl with hair the color of honey, and steady, disconcerting eyes.

He looked up as the door opened. The saloon was nearly empty. Dalton was wiping glasses behind his bar. A tall, gaunt man had entered, and Webb saw that he wore a star on his coat. That would be Ober, the town marshal, he decided. He had never seen the law officer, but Sycamore had mentioned him.

Ober came up and stopped to one side of Sycamore's chair, and his eyes took a cut at Webb across the table. They were flinty eyes, deep-set in a lined face that had a grayish cast to it, and the long mouth was set as if against pain. It was a ravaged face. Ober stood leaning over a little, like a man might do to ease a pain in his stomach.

He had been there only a few seconds when Sycamore glanced up, and Webb noticed the sudden wariness that settled on his friend's face. Then Sycamore grinned.

"Hello, you old buzzard! Haven't they planted you yet?"

Ober grunted. "Still flapping that yap of yours, huh? But then you never could keep it shut."

"It's mine to flap," Sycamore retorted, and winked at Webb. "I see you're still toting that badge, you old buzzard. Can you back it up?"

"Just step out of line and find out." Ober looked steadily at him. "It won't happen the way it did last time, son. Make another mess in my town and I'll lock you up."

Sycamore laughed. "Why, hell—" he began, but Ober had walked away, having had the last word. Blood burned the redhead's cheeks, and he gave another short laugh as if to show it didn't matter. "Damned old fool," he muttered.

One of the mule skinners said, "Why's he picking on you?"

Sycamore gave him an angry stare. "What's it to you?"

"Just asking," the fellow said. "No harm done."

Sycamore stared at him a second longer. Then he shrugged. He grinned tightly at Webb. "A farmer got rough with me one evening and I put a bullet in him. Didn't kill him, though. But the boss decided I'd better clear out until things quieted down. They did." Sycamore widened his grin. "The boss saw to it that the farmer left the country." He looked at the mule skinner. "That satisfy your big ears?"

So that was it, Webb thought. He played out the hand and rose, gathered in his money. "I've had enough."

He went to the window and looked out. There wasn't much to the town of Rincon, just two blocks of business buildings and a scattering of houses. Most of the buildings

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were unpainted and had a raw, warped look to them. The afternoon sun showed faintly through cloud streaks, and wind stirred the manes and tails of horses at the hitch racks.

A light wagon passed behind two tall mules, and Webb only had to look once at the man and woman on the high seat to recognize Bob and Linda Maynard. Bob parked near the corner in front of the mercantile, and Linda got down. She said something to her brother, and when he shook his head she reached for his arm. He kept glancing back at the saloon. He's on the prod, Webb thought.

Sycamore's voice reached him, thick with disgust. "Three-handed is no fun." There came the scrape of chair legs.

YOUNG Maynard was still on the wagon seat. It looked as if his sister was trying to talk him into going in the store. Webb wished he would. He could hear Sycamore coming up behind him, and he knew that once the redhead caught sight of Bob Maynard there'd be fireworks.

Webb wondered why he should care. Then he knew it was because of the girl. He didn't want her to have to watch a senseless fight that Sycamore would certainly win, and then have to take her battered and beaten brother back home.

"You aren't much fun today," Sycamore said gruffly as he came up. Then he swore. "There's that damn Carlson."

A paunchy figure had started to cross to the saloon. But when he looked up and saw Webb and Sycamore watching him, he veered away and disappeared from view.

Sycamore laughed shortly. "That guy's a gutless wonder if I ever saw one." He started for the door. "Let's get ourselves a steak."

"Fill your gutless gut with some of Dalton's free lunch," Webb said.

Sycamore spun around, his eyes bright. "Don't rub me, son. I'm not in the mood." But he was grinning.

"Dalton's got some dried beef that would do wonders for your gutless gut," Webb said.

"Why, damn you," Sycamore breathed, "do you need a licking to take the sourness out of you?"

Webb grinned. They had often fought for the joy of it. There was nothing wrong in that, because the reasons behind it were of the moment, and were laughed at after the fight was over. That's the way it could be now, Webb thought. He wanted to keep Sycamore away from young Maynard, and dull the edge of his discontent.

He said, "My guts might be sour, but I got 'em to spare, which is more than I can say for a certain redhead."

Sycamore let out a whoop and came at Webb, fists flying. They tangled like two wildcats and thumped to the floor. Sycamore let out another whoop and used his wiry strength to pin Webb's arms, but Webb put a boot in his middle and kicked him over backward. He scrambled to his feet as Sycamore rose, and smashed the redhead high on the face.

Sycamore said, "Ouch!" and grabbed Webb's arm, swung him up against the bar, and slugged him in the belly. Again they mixed it. Then Webb drove Sycamore back, and they tangled with a chair and sprawled flat. Both came up laughing.

Webb raised a hand. "Enough! Let's wash up and try some of that free lunch."

Dalton got them a pail of water and a flour sack towel, and when they had finished cleaning up he had a couple of plates set out for them.

"Man, I feel good!" Sycamore said, chewing heartily. "I feel a lucky streak coming. You gonna play, Webb?"

"Not right away."

"My bartender's due," Dalton said. "I'll sit in with you boys."

Webb left them playing. Maynard's wagon was still parked in front of the mercantile, the seat empty. Webb strolled along, stealing glances across the street, feeling unsure of himself, not knowing what he wanted, except maybe a glimpse of her.

When she spoke his name, it startled him so that he reddened as he turned and jerked his hat from his head. "Huh?"

"Mr. Freeman," she repeated. She stood in the doorway of a dress shop, a package in her hand, and she was smiling. Webb felt a lump rise to his throat, and he swallowed, moving his hat from one hand to the other. He'd known dancehall girls, but this Linda

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Webb took the limp body to where the horses were tied

Maynard was different, and he felt at a loss.

"Yes, ma'am," Webb said.

Her eyes stayed on his, and her smile deepened until dimples formed in her tanned cheeks. She said, "I want to thank you for what you did. I hope it didn't get you in trouble."

He'd expected anything but this, and he fumbled for words. But all he could mutter was, "No, ma'am—Miss Maynard. I'm mighty glad no one was hurt."

"Do you think they meant to hurt one of us?"

Her direct question made her frown, and it was an effort to return her steady gaze. "I wouldn't say that. But when a man pokes a rifle at another man, he's got to expect trouble."

She was silent a moment. Then she asked, "Do you think Mr. Denton is doing right when he tries to make Dad sell out?"

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"That's hardly something you'd want to ask me."

"I'm asking just the same."

"Well, I'm not saying. I haven't been here long enough to know what's going on, and I'll do my talking against Anchor if I quit."

"I'm not surprised."

"It isn't right for a man to talk against an outfit that's paying him his wages," Webb said, and to himself it sounded like bragging.

"You're honest. I like that," she said.

"Well, I guess—" Webb began lamely. But she was looking past him, and when he turned his head he saw young Maynard and a clerk lifting a pane of glass into the wagon.

"I'll have to go," she said.

She gave him a warm smile and darted across the street. Webb turned back to the saloon, a heady singing in him. Linda. Hair like honey and eyes to turn a man's heart. It was the first time in his life he had felt this way about a girl, and he sighed from his boots, wishing the feeling would never end.

He had walked past the saloon to the end of town before he noticed what he was doing. Then he wiped the silly grin from his face and turned back.

CHARLIE DENTON strode into the saloon not long after that, Bitter Root in tow as usual. It was getting near supper time, the poker game had broken up, and only two customers stood at the bar.

Sycamore called, "Hiya, boss! How about a drink? You know old Carlson's in town?"

"I figured so. We stopped by his place and he wasn't there. He's likely playing checkers over at the hotel." Charlie Denton chuckled grimly. "Webb, go over and tell him I want to see him."

"I'll keep Webb company," Sycamore said.

"You'll stay here," Charlie Denton told him, and grinned at Webb. "Get him here if you have to carry him. Show him you mean business, and don't take any back talk. On your way, now. You know where to find the hotel, don't you?"

"I reckon, since there's only one," Webb said dryly, and walked out.

He was thinking it was like Denton to send for a man, instead of going over to see him. Then he told himself it was none of his affair. He passed the marshal's office and saw Ober snoozing behind a rolltop desk, gray head sagging to one side.

Webb grinned. It was a good thing he'd kept Sycamore from tangling with young Maynard, else the redhead might be occupying a cell by now. Denton might rule most of the range, but Ober had sounded like a man that ruled the town, and no nonsense about it.

The hotel looked like a big frame box with windows. Weeds grew thick in the vacant lots on either side. Webb entered and saw two bowed heads above the pine desk, and he walked over there. Carlson, and a skinny clerk with chin whiskers, were sitting on boxes with the checker board between them. The rancher was about to move a checker when he looked up, startled.

But he didn't recognize Webb, and relief washed the quick fear from his protruding eyes. It rippled again to the surace when Webb asked, wanting to be sure, "You Carlson?"

"Yeah, I'm Carlson."

"Charlie Denton is over at the saloon. He asked to see you."

Carlson moistened his lips. "What's he want?"

"I don't know," Webb said, annoyed, and glanced briefly at the skinny clerk, who was watching him. "He just said he wants to see you."

Indecision showed openly on Carlson's face. He looked like one who was being pulled two ways at once, and not set to fight back either way.

He blinked his eyes and said hoarsely, "I guess I'd better go," but he sat a moment longer before getting to his feet.

The clerk watched and made no comment. Then, as Carlson followed Webb to the door, the clerk said, "Come back and let's finish this game."

"Sure," Carlson said hoarsely.

Webb looked at him and saw the rancher was sweating, saw him tug at the gunbelt around his waist. A man of that kind had no business wearing a gun, Webb thought. He saw Carlson glance toward the marshal's office, and wondered if the rancher had heard what had happened at Maynard's that morn-

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ing. That was probably what had made him nervous.

Webb slowed his steps a little as they approached the saloon, so that Carlson could enter first. The rancher gave him a jumpy look, and Webb said, "What's wrong with you?"

Grinning feebly, Carlson shook his head. He pulled a bandanna from his back pocket and used it to wipe his forehead, then his mouth. He pushed the bandanna into his coat pocket and grinned his feeble grin as he opened the door.

Dalton was at the front, leaning on his bar reading a newspaper. He gave Carlson barely a glance, grunted something, then looked down again. Dalton was a small, neat man with slick black hair that he parted in the middle. A mind-my-own business kind of man, Webb thought.

Charlie Denton, whisky glass in hand, stood by the table where Bitter Root and Sycamore were playing a two-handed game of stud. Webb went over there, and Sycamore winked at him.

Charlie Denton walked over to Carlson and said in jovial anger, "A man never knows where to find you, Karl. Don't you ever stay home?"

"No more'n I have to," Carlson said, as though to show he had a mind of his own. "An old bachelor like me likes to get out among people."

"There aren't too many people around this country." Charlie Denton leaned on the bar and reached for the bottle. He filled a glass and pushed it along the scarred amhogany. "Have a drink."

"Thanks, Charlie."

Carlson's hand shook so that whisky slopped over the edge before he downed it. He made a little blowing sound and squared his shoulders. "Thanks," he said again.

Charlie Denton grined at him. "Well, that's better. Now tell me, have you made your fall gather?"

"Close to three hundred head," Calson said. "I'll be driving to railhead next week."

"Why, now," Charlie Denton said easily, "I took it those beef were included in the offer I made you."

Carlson reached for his bandanna and rubbed it between his hands. He put the bandanna back in his coat pocket and shivered like a man who can't make up his mind.

"I dunno as we mentioned that," he said.

"The hell we didn't!" Charlie Denton broke in brutally.

DALTON turned a frowning face, but he didn't say anything. He ducked beneath his bar and went outside the door. Webb looked at Carlson, aware of a mild disgust. Why didn't the man stand up to Denton the way Maynard had done?

It was a disloyal thought, but suddenly Webb knew that he didn't care. His sense of injustice had been spurred too often of late, and a man had only himself to live with. Carlson might be weak and worthless, but that didn't give Denton the right to push him, he thought. He rose and wandered to the pool table, and rolled balls across the felt.

"Speak up!" Charlie Denton said roughly. "The last time we talked I had you climbing down on my side of the fence. Don't stall on me now."

"I never did say for sure I'd sell out to you." Carlson spoke in a voice he tried hard to control. "I'm holding on to my place, Charlie."

"What's this?" Charlie Denton took the other by the lapels of his coat. "What's this you say?"

"Don't, Charlie!"

"You've been talking to Maynard."

"Let go of me, Charlie."

"The two of you think you can buck me!" Charlie Denton shook him slowly, his eyes raging. "I was the first man in this valley, and almost starved to death in the beginning so worthless trash like you could make a living. I kept the sodbusters and the rustlers off your backs when you all didn't have the guts to go against them."

He slapped Carlson heavily across the face. "Don't tell me what you're gonna do—I'll tell you! You're selling to me, and make no mistake about it!"

"Charlie, be reasonable."

Denton said, "The hell with you," and shoved him away. He turned for the bottle.

Carlson, his face white and his mouth trem-

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bling, said, "Charlie, please listen." He reached again for his bandanna.

There was the sudden roar of a shot, and Carlson clasped his side and said, "Oh." Then his knees buckled and he pitched to the floor, the bandanna still between his fingers.

Bitter Root, smoking gun in hand, rose from his chair and eyed Webb for a brief moment before he holstered the gun.

It was all so quick. Carlson's pleading voice still sounded in Webb's ears, and he looked wide-eyed at the crumpled figure, thinking he should have expected something like this. He looked at Sycamore, who stared back at him with his mouth half open.

Charlie Denton said, "What'd he try to do, plug me in the back?"

"Yeah," Bitter Root said.

Dalton had come running inside. Three or four men followed him, and faces pressed against the window.

Someone outside shouted, "What happened?"

A second voice answered, "There's been a shooting in Dalton's place."

"I should've known better than to trust him," Charlie Denton said bitterly. "Stupid of me. Damn stupid!"

Others had crowded inside, and they formed a half circle around Carlson. Denton sat on his heels and turned the body face up. Then he rose and thumbed his hat back.

"He's long gone."

He turned his head as a gruff voice said, "Make way, make way." Marshal Ober stepped into view. He took one look at the body, said, "Whot shot him?"

"Bitter Root," Charlie Denton said. "Carlson and I were having a little argument. When I turned to pour us a drink he went for his gun." Denton shrugged.

Ober looked at him. "If your back was turned, how do you know he went for his gun?"

"Bitter Root told me. Sycamore saw it too. So did Freeman."

Ober turned to Sycamore. "Is that right?"

"He sure was reaching for something," Sycamore said.

Ober eyed him a moment longer. "His gun's still in the holster."

"Knowing Carlson, you should realize he isn't fast with a gun," Charlie Denton said, annoyed. "The only way he could get me was in the back, and Bitter Root was sitting right there and saw it all."

Ober grunted. He looked at Webb. "What about it?"

WEBB felt a moment of indecision. Had Bitter Root actually thought Carlson was reaching for his gun? He glanced at Bitter Root and saw the gunman's veiled eyes watching him. And he realized he had known the truth the second he heard the shot.

There was no use fooling himself. He took a long breath, shook his head. "Carlson wasn't reaching for his gun."

"What are you talking about?" Charlie Denton shouted. He elbowed a man aside, stepped across the body, and confronted Webb. "Don't lie about this!"

"I'm not lying," Webb said stubbornly. "Carlson was scared stiff. He kept taking his bandanna from his coat pocket. That's what he was doing when Bitter Root shot him. Carlson had the bandanna in his hand when he fell."

Bitter Root gave him a killing look, as Ober bent over the body. After a while Ober glanced up. "It isn't here."

Webb said hotly, "Then Denton must've picked it up a minute ago."

Ober straightened. "What about it?"

Charlie Denton ignored him. He pushed the marshal aside with a thrust of his arm. "Kid, you just lost a job." Eyes raging, he shouted, "You aren't working for me and you aren't working in this valley! I'll run you clear back to Texas if I have to, you hear me!" He lunged at Webb, but Ober held him back. "You'll regret this! I'll nail your hide to the barn door before I'm through!"

Still glaring at Webb, he shook loose from Ober's grip and stood there breathing hard, his face red, veins pulsing in his temples.

"That's enough," Ober said. "Now where's that bandanna?"

"The kid's lying," Charlie Denton answered shortly.

Ober looked at him with his flinty eyes. "All right. But I'll have to take Bitter Root and lock him up."

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"What's wrong with you, listening to this kid? There are two against him to say the killing was justified."

"This is still my town, so don't give me an argument," Ober said. "We'll hold the inquest tomorrow. Meanwhile he's my prisoner."

Charlie Denton's lips pressed together as he stared thoughtfully at the floor. Then he looked up and said to Bitter Root, "Go with him. They'll never hang it on you at the inquest. But in case they do, I'll have you out on bail long before the trial."

Bitter Root grunted as Ober lifted the Navy Colt from his holster. Unarmed, the gunman looked small and helpless. The marshal turned to Webb.

"You be here to testify tomorrow, son," he said, and led Bitter Root outside.

Charlie Denton said to Sycamore, "We're gonna see lawyer Breen. Come along." He shouldered his way outside, but Sycamore hesitated, an anxious scowl on his homely, freckled face.

He said softly, "You shouldn't have crossed the boss, Webb. How do you know Carlson wasn't going for his gun?"

"I got eyes."

Sycamore shook his head. "You sure messed things up, but it still isn't too late." He gripped Webb's arm. "Go tell Ober you made a mistake."

"I can't do that, Syc."

The strained silence that settled on Webb gave him a sad and lonely feeling. Finally Sycamore said in a baffled way, "I don't know what to think." Then he was gone.

Webb went out and walked slowly along the street. Men glanced at him in passing; he could hear them talking in low voices after he had gone by. Thinking about it, he knew where he stood, and a grayness settled within him. He told himself that he might be in the wrong.

And it came to him that if a man wanted to badly enough, he could justify his actions and keep at least some kind of hold on his self-respect. But there was still conscience, and it was not easy to ignore.

Sure, he could tell Ober he made a mistake. He stopped and sighed heavily, and slowly shook his head. He knew what he had to do. Then he thought that Maynard should know what had happened, and he turned to the stable to pick up his horse.

TURNING up Maynard's lane, Webb met the lanky man, and noticed the blanket roll behind his cantle. Open curiosity showed on the fellow's face, but he passed Webb with only a short nod of recognition and did not speak.

Webb rode on. Maynard came out on the veranda as he trotted across the yard. Then Linda and her brother appeared behind their father. Webb pulled rein, but he didn't dismount.

"Something happened in town that I thought you should know about," Webb said, and told what had happened. Their faces registered shock.

"Denton's a sly one," John Maynard said, when Webb had finished. He looked at his son. "It could have happened to you this morning. I didn't want to think so, but now I'm sure of it. The man will stop at nothing."

Linda said, "Karl has no one. We'll have to arrange for the funeral."

"Bob and I'll go into town," Maynard said. He came down the steps. "You'd better spend the night here, Freeman. Bitter Root isn't the only man in Denton's crew that'll do a gun job for him."

"I wouldn't want to impose on you."

"Impose, hell! A lot of folks around here will want you to speak up at that inquest tomorrow, and take Denton down a notch or two. Put your horse up and get in the house. Denton might not make a move against you right away, but there's no use taking chances." Then, to his son, he added, "Let's go, Bob."

Linda came to the doorway when Webb returned to the house. She let him in and said musingly, "I was right about you, Webb Freeman. I told Dad I liked your looks the minute I saw you."

Her straightforward manner of speaking both disturbed and delighted Webb, but he didn't quite know how to answer her. "It wasn't something I liked doing, mainly on account of Sycamore," he said finally.

She nodded, and seated herself on the sofa. He sat across from her on the edge of his

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chair, his hat on his knees. "I don't know. Sycamore to speak to, but he always seemed sort of devilish," she said. "I suppose to another man he's good company."

"He sure is. Why, I remember the time down in Mexico—" He broke off and grinned. "I don't reckon you'd care to hear about that."

"You've been to Mexico?"

"Syc and I took a trip down to Chihuahua one time. Didn't stay long, but we sure had fun."

She leaned forward, small chin clasped in her hand, and regarded him steadily. "I was born in Kansas. We came here four years ago. I like it here better than I did in Kansas."

"I'm from Texas," Webb said. "My folks were farmers. It was bad country for farming, just took the heart out of a man, and never got him anything from one year to the other."

"It's having good neighbors and being contented that counts," Linda said. "We've been happy here, and we were doing well until Charlie Denton got after Dad to sell out."

"It's about time someone stood up to Denton," said Webb.

She smiled, her dimples showing. "The rider we had quit us today. Tell Dad you want the job."

Webb fingered the crown of his hat. "Might make things worse for him than they already are."

She watched him. "That's not what you're thinking of. You're thinking that working for Dad will put you on the other side of the fence from Sycamore."

"That's part of it, I guess," he admitted.

"Would you like something to eat?"

"Well—"

She rose. "I'll make you a sandwich. That'll hold you until supper."

Webb put his hat on the chair and followed her into the kitchen.

MAYNARD and his son returned after dark, and during supper Maynard said, "There's a lot of talk in town against Denton, but it isn't overly loud because he sent Sycamore out to round up his crew. Right now there're a dozen Anchor men in Dalton's drinking whisky that Denton's paying for, and they're all of a mind.

"I don't know, Webb. Folks didn't particularly care for Carlson, and most of 'em are afraid of Denton. The outcome'll depend on the kind of jury Judge Hull selects. If they justify the killing, Denton will come out of it stronger than ever."

"No use worrying about it beforehand," Webb said.

"No," Maynard said. For an instant his eyes narrowed. "But you'd better start worrying if it goes in Bitter Root's favor tomorrow, because he's one man that holds a grudge."

Remembering Bitter Root's killing look, Webb nodded. Maynard pushed away from the table. "Well, we might as well get a good night's sleep." As he passed behind Webb, he put a hand on the younger man's shoulder.

Linda brought blankets in. "It's too bad your gear is still at Anchor," she said. "You can't very well go after it now."

"I could, but it doesn't matter," Webb said, and smiled crookedly. "About all I own I carry on my back." He went to take the blankets from her. "You don't need to go to any trouble for me."

"I want to," she said.

His heart hammered, and her nearness in the crisp night, as they walked toward the bunkhouse, was like a dream. A cold moon shone in the black sky. Their feet scuffed the fallen leaves of the live oaks; a horse stamped and snorted in the corral, and the sound of the river reached them.

At the bunkhouse, she said, "Wait here. I know just where the lamp is."

He heard the starched rustle of her skirts in the darkness. When she had lighted the lamp, her small, tanned face lifted and smiled at him. He wondered what it would be like to kiss her mouth.

She made up one of the bunks. "I hope you sleep well. Good night, Webb."

"Good night, Linda."

Lying sleepless in the unfamiliar room, Webb thought about her for a long time, but just before he dozed off, he wondered what the results of the inquest would be, and if he would be bunking here next night, or on his way out of the country.

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Late the following afternoon Webb had his answer. Having telegraphed the county seat the previous day, Marshal Ober had been at the stage depot that morning to greet the county coroner and the sheriff. After listening to the testimonies of the several witnesses involved, the coroner's jury of six men recommended that Bitter Root be held for trial.

Maynard murmured as they came outside, "It was your testimony that did it, Webb."

Denton had made a mistake in taking the bandanna from Carlson's dead hand, Webb thought. The hotel clerk had testified that Carlson'd had it on him when he accompanied Webb to the saloon. And Dalton had admitted to seeing Carlson use it to wipe his forehead and then put it back in his coat pocket.

There was a scattering of people in front of the building now. Linda and Bob came to join Webb and Maynard. Then Webb saw Sycamore step through the door, and the sight of his friend's scowling expression gave him a feeling of helplessness. For a brief moment their eyes met, and Sycamore shook his head in a baffled way, as though what had happened was just too much for him.

The redhead had his doubts too, Webb thought. But they would never be strong enough to become certain, because Charlie Denton was involved. Well, there was nothing that could be done about it now.

The stage pulled around the corner and eased to a stop. A minute or so later the sheriff came out with Bitter Root, who wore a set of handcuffs. Charlie Denton and Breen, the lawyer, followed. Denton stopped and said something to Sycamore, who nodded.

Afterward the rancher boarded the stage with others, the six horses leaned into their traces, and the coach rolled southward toward the county seat, where Bitter Root would be booked and would stand trial.

Maynard said, "According to Judge Hull, the trial won't be until some time next week, and Denton'll have Bitter Root in front of the district judge and out on bail by this time tomorrow."

Webb grunted. He was watching Sycamore and the rest of Denton's crew cross over to the saloon, and he had the sudden wild need to join his friend. He felt the light touch of a hand on his arm, and was not surprised to find that it was Linda's.

She smiled at him. "Things will turn out all right."

There was a long silence, which Maynard broke.

"Well, we might as well get back to the ranch. And from now on until the trial, I want you to stick around the house, Webb. Don't worry about not earning your wages, either, because I'll see to it that you keep busy. Bob and I can handle what range work needs doing, until this business gets settled."

In this way Maynard offered him a job, and Webb thought briefly that he would refuse, but he said nothing and merely nodded. He didn't like the idea of being opposed to Sycamore, but he had to put up with it just the same and finish what he had started. He wondered how Sycamore felt about the situation.

DURING the next two days, Webb cleaned out the two corrals and the stable. He checked the gear in the barn and turned the hay in the loft, and he kept busy. On finishing her housework, Linda would work in her garden, and Webb helped her at odd moments. During the midday meal they would sit across the table from each other and talk, and Webb found himself confiding in her as he had never confided in anyone, not even Sycamore.

"Fiddlefooting around the country is all right up to a point, but it doesn't get a man anywhere. And if you keep at it long enough, you find you can't change. I've met men of forty who drifted most of their lives and always talked about settling down. But, when they had the chance, they couldn't stick to a steady job, and one day they'd pack up and move on without a word."

"You're only twenty."

"And I've spent five of those years drifting. That's why I'm here. I told myself I wanted to see this Wyoming country, and I'm not sorry. But still, it gets so a man doesn't pay much attention to his surroundings, and every strange town begins to look like the last one. So you move on. It's like running away from something. Maybe that's what it really is.

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You get used to the life, and keep running to escape responsibility. And if you live long enough you end up swamping out saloons and sleeping in the livery stable."

"You're full of discontent, and that's only natural," Linda said. "I've felt the same way. There were times, watching the stage leave town, that I wished I were on it. Last year I made up my mind to go East to visit an aunt. But what I really wanted to do was get work in one of the big cities. There was a hungry longing in me to see more of the world than I've seen."

"What happened to keep you from going?"

"One morning I woke up and the feeling was gone, and I haven't had it since."

"I guess it must get kind of lonely for you here, though."

"It's not so bad. I keep busy. Then we have church socials and dances and musicals, and I read a lot. And I've been asked to teach at the school next year."

"I only had two years of schooling," Webb sair wryly. "I can read if I study on it long enough but writing a letter is a chore I can barely handle."

"Would you like me to help you learn?"

"I sure would!"

"Then we'll begin this evening, after supper. I'll find out what you know, and we can start from there."

She was different from any girl Webb had ever met. Her strange gravity and quiet directness often made him feel young and awkward. That evening at the kitchen table, they went through McGuffey's Primer and four readers. After he had stumbled through a long passage, Linda was delighted.

"You know more than you gave yourself credit for," she said. On impulse, she leaned over and kissed his cheek, and gave a soft laugh. "I'll bet in no time at all you'll be studying the High School Reader. Who knows? Maybe one day you'll be a doctor or a lawyer!"

"Doctor Freeman," Webb mused, touching his cheek where she'd kissed him. "Just think of it, Mr. Fiddlefoot."

On the fourth day, Jake Monte trotted up the lane. Maynard and his son had gone out with the work wagon to fix fence, and Webb was cleaning the trough and listening to Linda singing as she went about her housework, when he looked up and saw Monte. Knowing the man had walked out on Maynard, Webb answered his wave with a bare nod, thinking Monte was here to pick up something he had forgotten.

So he was surprised when Monte veered toward the corral and said, "Got a message for you."

Webb came forward slowly. "What kind of a message?"

"It's from that fellow they call Sycamore. I saw him in town and he asked me to tell you to meet him at the foot of Rock Canyon around noon. He said he'd bring the gear that you left at Anchor."

"Is that all he said?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks," Webb said.

Monte turned his horse and trotted out of the yard, just as Linda came outside. She came over as Webb stepped from the corral. "What did he want?"

Webb told her, and saw a sudden anxiety ripple in her eyes. She said, "Don't go, Webb."

"Why not? It's a chance to get my gear, and to talk to Syc. After all, there's no reason why we can't still be friends."

"It could be a trap to get you out of the way."

Webb shook his head. "Not Syc. He wouldn't be a party to anything like that."

"You can't tell. He might have changed, Webb. Please don't go. You know what Dad learned yesterday, about Bitter Root being out on bail and back at the ranch." She She paused, added urgently, "I could go instead."

"Don't be foolish," Webb said. "Anyhow, nothing'll happen as long as Syc is around. I'd trust that boy with my life."

She faced him, head up, lips taut, eyes flashing. "So you'd trust him wih your life. Don't make me laugh, Webb Freeman. There's more involved than your desire to keep Sycamore as a friend. Can't you see that if something happens to you, Bitter Root is certain to go free? Don't you realize that, if this happens, Charlie Denton will go on hurting people in order to get what he wants?"

He could be stubborn. "I'm telling you it

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will be all right. If I didn't trust Syc I wouldn't go. And that's just what he'll think, if I don't show."

"All right, then, go!" she flashed. "But if anything happens to you—" She choked and ran toward the house.

Webb sighed. He looked at the pale sun and decided it was about time, so he saddled his horse and headed for Rock Canyon.

IT WAS a narrow, boulder-strewn canyon, the southern boundary of Charlie Denton's domain. Webb slowed his horse and looked around, for he realized that Linda hadn't talked nonsense. Then he saw Sycamore sitting on a boulder alongside a piddling stream, and he heeled his horse forward. Sycamore lifted a hand in a short wave of recognition, and Webb rode over and swung down.

"How're you making out, Webb?" Sycamore said.

Webb said, "All right."

Then they were silent a moment. The wind that swept down the canyon had a bite to it, and Webb buttoned his heavy coat. "Cold," he said.

"Sure is," Sycamore agreed.

"Be snowing up here before long."

"It usually snows this time of the year." Sycamore indicated the blanket roll below the boulder. "Brought your gear."

"Thanks."

There followed an awkward silence, during which they didn't look directly at each other. Sycamore gazed off across the canyon, and Webb sat on his heels and flipped little pebbles at the stream.

"I don't know that I like saying this," Sycamore remarked finally, "but maybe it's for the best."

"What's that?"

"Well, it was really the boss's idea, but I go along with him on it because it's for your own good, Webb. They aren't ever going to convict Bitter Root, not by a long sight, and the first chance he gets he'll come gunning for you. Not even the boss can hold him back when he's got an itch to kill. That's why the boss said it would be a good idea for you to leave the country."

"Oh, now, Syc," Webb said in a hurt voice.

Sycamore reddened. "Well, I promised I'd talk to you. The boss gave me two hundred bucks to give you."

"Did you think I'd take it?"

Sycamore said in a tired way, "No, I didn't, Webb. When Monte came out to the ranch yesterday, I told the boss you'd never leave the country."

Webb frowned. "Let's get something straight. Didn't you see Monte in town and tell him to get word to me to meet you here?"

"Huh?" Sycamore stared at him. "Hell no, and if that's what he said he's a liar. He told the boss you were probably staying at Maynard's, and the boss said for me to pack your gear and be out here at noon. He said he'd sent Monte after you."

So that was it, Webb thought. Denton wanted him out of the country. But he must have known that any message would have to come from Sycamore or Webb wouldn't even consider it. So he'd told Monte just what to say, arranged a tricky piece of business to get Webb out here. But still Sycamore couldn't see it. Instead, he blamed Monte and called him a liar.

Webb said, "I wonder what Monte's idea was when he told Denton about me."

Sycamore spat. "He was looking for a job, and I guess that was his way of getting in with the boss. I swear I didn't know about this, Webb. We didn't know for sure where you were, but I had an idea you were staying with Maynard, and I was fixing to bring your gear over Sunday morning. "You know nothing'd stop me from riding to Maynard's place."

"I know that, Syc, and I appreciate it," Webb said.

"We've been friends too long—" Sycamore suddenly let out a yell and dove at Webb, knocking him over just as a bullet screamed past where his head had been. As Webb scrambled to his feet, Sycamore yelled, "Ride like hell out of here!" and ran afoot up the rocky slope and plunged out of sight in the boulders.

Webb palmed his gun and followed. He heard the sharp hammer of a shot, and then that of a second, more distant shot. Hoofbeats started up and quickened, then faded and died out. Another distant shot rang out.

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Boots slipping on the rocky slope, Webb came around a huge boulder. He saw Sycamore lying face down below a cut bank that rose steeply and became the rim of the canyon. Whoever had shot the redhead must have pounded out of sight up that wooded rise.

Webb ran forward, a terrible dread in him, and eased Sycamore onto his back. There was a gaping wound in his chest, his eyes were closed, and there was a grayish stain on his cheeks, but he was still breathing.

"Syc!"

Sycamore's lids fluttered open. His gaze focused on Webb. He made an effort and said, "It was Bitter Root."

"Take it easy, Syc."

"He must've seen me pack your gear, and he followed me. But I didn't know he had, Webb."

"I know you didn't."

"I told you he'd be gunning for you, didn't I? But I sure never figured him to go after you before the trial."

It wasn't in Sycamore to suspect that Charlie Denton had used him to get Webb out here so that Bitter Root could get a shot at him. The redhead could no more think wrong of the rancher who had raised him than he could of Webb, who had shared a year of his life.

Webb said gently, "I didn't either, Syc."

Sycamore smiled. "Say so long to the boss for me."

Webb felt himself nod. "I'll cut your trail again, Syc."

Sycamore tried to answer, raised up, then fell back. Webb blinked his eyes. He straightened slowly, after pushing shut Sycamore's lids, and suddenly he became aware of the rider on the bank above him. It was Linda. A rifle rested across her pommel. The tears in her eyes surprised Webb.

"It was Bitter Root," he said.

"I thought as much, but I wasn't sure."

"Was it you that fired at him?"

She nodded. "I saw him from a distance and knew he was getting ready to shoot again, so I fired to distract him. He climbed on his horse and ran."

Webb bent down, picked Sycamore up in his arms, and carried the body to where the horses were tied. He tied the limp form across the saddle, then climbed on his own horse and waited for Linda to join him.

She said, "Where are you taking him, Webb?"

Webb looked past her, in the direction of Anchor. "I want you to take him to town."

"Webb—" she crowded her horse forward—"don't go there! Please don't go there!" She was crying. "They'll kill you, Webb."

He didn't seem to hear. "I tied him good, but ride slow and easy. Tell the marshal what happened, and see to it that Sycamore is taken care of."

"Oh, please, Webb, don't ride to Anchor!" she cried. When he handed her the reins of Sycamore's horse she took them automatically, her tear-filled eyes still on Webb. "Don't take it upon yourself, Webb. Let the law go after Bitter Root."

"Do as I told you," Webb said, and rode away.

THE Anchor holdings were built of peeled logs that had been stained brown. The ranch house was a sprawling structure with a wide veranda running its full length. It stood on a knoll overlooking the grassy reaches of Denton's domain. On the level stretch a hundred yards from the knoll, the bunkhouse and outbuildings fronted the two big corrals. Beyond them rose a long slope dotted with live oaks, and farther on the steep hills were streaked dark with timber.

Webb stopped to check his rifle and his Colt. Then he looked again carefully, but saw no sign of movement around either the main house or the outbuildings. He noticed that there were only a few horses in the corrals.

The crew would be out on the range, he decided, and rode forward. Either Bitter Root was here, or he had gone to join the crew.

There was still no sign as he walked his horse past the knoll and approached the outbuildings. Then Lubell, the cook, a canvas apron around his vast middle, appeared from the cook shed. He stopped dead still at sight of Webb.

Lubell's eyes were uneasy as Webb rode up and stopped his horse. Webb sat hipshot, his hand on the butt of his Colt. He said, "Where's Bitter Root?"

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"He isn't here."

"I asked you where he is."

Lubell hesitated. "I reckon he's out with the crew."

"Where's Denton?"

"They're all out on the west slopes gathering the herd Charlie means to drive to railhead." Lubell was grinning now, too sure of himself to suit Webb. "Yeah, you just head that way and you'll find 'em."

Webb looked around. Then he swung down and started for the shed. Lubell stepped in front of him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Get out of my way."

Lubell stepped to one side, and Webb stood in the doorway and looked at the long table with its wooden benches. He went to the stove and put his hand against the coffee pot, jerked it away.

He turned to Lubell, who was watching him, and said, "You don't drink coffee, and the pot is still hot. It shouldn't be, with the crew gone since daylight. Bitter Root stopped by here, didn't he?"

"That's right. Then he went to join the crew."

Webb pulled his Colt clear and walked up to the cook. "Either I get the truth or I break your face."

"I *am* telling the truth!"

Webb struck him hard on the temple with the barrel of the gun. Lubell yelled and staggered back. "Let's have it," Webb said. "I've never known you to make up an extra pot of coffee for one man, not even Bitter Root. So let's have the truth."

Lubell took another step back, as Webb moved in on him again. "My God, don't hit me again! Charlie was here when Bitter Root came. They left right after."

"Where did they go?"

"I don't know. But Charlie was raving mad, I know that much."

Webb went back to his horse and climbed aboard. He reined out of the yard, thinking it very likely that Bitter Root had told Denton that he, Webb, had shot Sycamore. That meant they would be looking for him. Denton would stop first at Rock Canyon, after which he would go on to Maynard's ranch. Maybe, Webb thought, it was hard to tell. Denton might head for town after finding that Sycamore's body was gone.

Town was his best bet, Webb decided, and headed that way. It was a long hour's ride, and all that time his thoughts were on Sycamore. It was hard to realize that his friend was dead, and that they would never again share laughter and good times.

The buildings of Rincon appeared in the distance, and Webb eased down to a trot, then a walk, as he entered the street. There was a small crowd in front of the barber shop, where one back room served as a funeral parlor. Linda's and Sycamore's horses were tied there.

WEBB went inside, and found Linda talking with Marshal Ober. Her face lit up when she saw Webb.

"You didn't find Bitter Root," she said.

Webb shook his head. He turned to Ober. "Denton is with him. I thought they might have come here."

"They will." Ober nodded grimly. "You two had better go to my office and stay there, while I go send a telegram to the sheriff. This is county business and I want it done right."

They went out. Men looked at Webb's bleak face and withheld their questions. Linda clung to his arm. "It's best this way," she said softly.

Webb guessed it was, but he didn't feel right about it, either. For the first time in his life he had been set to kill, the need had filled him, and now there was only a cold emptiness with him.

In Ober's office, he stood at the window and looked out on the street. Linda did not attempt to speak, for which he was grateful. They had been silent only a few minutes, when Dalton ran across the street and flung the door open.

"Denton and Bitter Root are here. They're over looking at the body. Where's Ober?"

"At the depot."

Webb shouldered past Dalton and Linda cried out and gripped his arm with surprising strength. "Don't go out there, Webb!"

"I'm not hiding here, not with Syc dead in that place. He wouldn't stay put if it were me who was dead in that room."

"Then be careful, and come back to us."

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Her lips taut, Linda stood in the doorway as Webb walked swiftly along the street. He had no plan, and he didn't know what to expect. He knew only that he had to face Bitter Root in the open. One thing puzzled him—that so far the gunman had gotten away with his bluff.

Webb was sure now that Bitter Root had lied to Charlie Denton about how Sycamore had been killed. And he supposed that those in the crowd who by now knew or guessed the truth, were keeping silent because they feared Bitter Root. Now the man's only chance of not being uncovered lay in killing Webb before he could talk. The gunman had run when Linda fired on him at the canyon, but it was not likely he would run again.

Webb walked on. He was less than fifty feet from the barber shop when Bitter Root stepped outside. The man saw him at once, and Webb halted. A muscle jerked in the gunman's face, and his shoulder dipped as he went for his Navy Colt. He was fast but he was also hurried, and the distance did not make for accurate shooting.

Webb heard the bullet scream past his body. He palmed his own gun and held his fire, as Charlie Denton plunged outside with a roar of protest and shouldered Bitter Root aside. "I'll take care of the son, and I won't use a gun, either!"

Webb said, "Hold it, Denton."

Charlie Denton ignored him, and disregarded the gun in Webb's hand completely. His fist caught Webb in the chest with the force of a club, and Webb fell up against the hitch rack, all the breath knocked out of him. He rolled aside as Denton came at him again; he struck out at the face tight-set with rage.

Webb felt his mind go blank as a fist caught him alongside the jaw. He kicked out at Denton, catching him in the crotch. Charlie Denton let go then and staggered back.

Webb, his face livid, shouted, "Listen to me, damn it! I didn't kill Sycamore! Bitter Root did it! Look at him and see!"

For a second, Charlie Denton's face registered complete shock. He looked like a man might who opens the door to his house and finds his wife in another man's arms. He stared at Webb as he straightened slowly, then looked past him at Bitter Root.

Webb followed his gaze. Bitter Root's right shoulder dipped, though the Navy Colt was still in his hand. Charlie Denton took a step toward him.

"What about it?" he asked softly.

"It's the truth, Charlie." Marshal Ober spoke with heavy gruffness. He had come up unnoticed from across the street. "Bitter Root missed his shot at Webb because of Sycamore. So when Sycamore went after him, Bitter Root shot him."

Charlie Denton did not seem to hear. He took another step forward. "Crossed me, huh? You knew I thought the world of that boy, but you were in a killing mood so you put a bullet in him."

"He shouldn't have got in my way," Bitter Root said.

Ober said, "Drop your gun," but Ober might just as well not have been there for all the attention they paid to him.

"Come and get it," Charlie Denton said, and his hand streaked for his gun.

Bitter Root fired. His bullet took Charlie Denton in the chest, and the rancher went to his knees. He brought his gun clear as Bitter Root fired a second time, but then his whole body shuddered and he fell forward.

Bitter Root turned at once and fired at Webb. But Webb had moved, and the gunman missed. Before he could trigger again, Webb raised his own gun, took deliberate aim, and shot Bitter Root.

The bullet took Bitter Root in the forehead. He stiffened, came up on his toes, and then pitched forward on his face.

Webb looked at the body and felt nothing.

Ober took his elbow. "Both dead. That ends it. I guess Sycamore was the same as family to Charlie."

The crowd parted for Webb. He saw Linda waiting across the street, and he walked up to her. She was smiling.

"You came back," she said.

"Yes."

"Now we can go home."

Home, he thought, and looked at her. And all the loose ends of his life seemed to come together in this moment.

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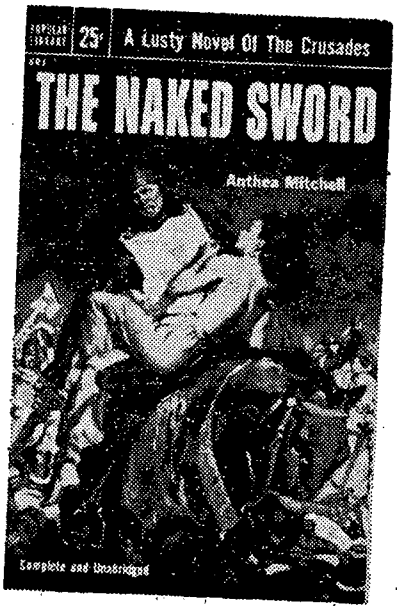

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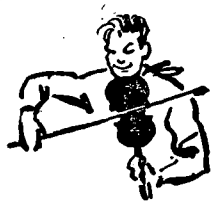

The Deputy's

WILD and lone in the late fall night the fiddle's hoedown, two-string tune set a restless beat for boots and lighter, daintier feet that were weaving, shuffling on Rabbit Trap's schoolhouse floor. The older men hulked darkly in the slant of lamplight outside the door.

One of them was saying, "I heard a coyote singing on the ridges last night."

Deputy Lute Bristow nodded, and said solemnly, "Cold weather coming. Wedge of snow geese went honking by about sun-up." He sniffed the air. "Your alfalfa cured nicely, Ike; I can smell it from here."

The stomping cadence of the set drowned out the reply. Lute's daughter Ellie was letting a strange cowboy lead her off the floor. He held her elbow hard, and his grin was wide. His words rode out above the squawk of Daddy Hunt's fiddle-string tuning.

"Know any reels?"

Daddy Hunt said, "Sonny, I know every reel tune there is." His bow went dum-tiddy-um, te-dum. He yelled, "Grab your partners for a Virginia Reel!"

Ellie repossessed her elbow from the cowboy and asked him, "Do you have a name?"

He grinned again. "Names don't count for much. Most folk call me Choc. I'm part Choctaw. You got a name?"

He was acting awfully familiar, but Ellie couldn't say she disliked it. She kept her lips prim and cool as she said, "I'm Ellie Bristow. Only an outlaw won't tell his name, and my father knows every outlaw in Going Snake district."

The cowboy's grin spread wide. "He won't know me." The fiddle swung out, and Choc took her arm and headed for the reel set.

With the fiddle bearing down hard, Deputy Lute Bristow had to speak loud to be heard by the men standing with him outside the schoolhouse door.

"—should've got my letter last week. Well, I'll be hitching up now. Ma and Ellie and I will be leaving as soon as the midnight stage gets the mail in."

Later, winding along the wagon road, through the dark trace of cross timbers blackjacks, Lute put the question. "Who was he, Ellie?"

Ellie was listening to the ring of singletree chains against the dimming

LUTE BRISTOW WAS sure the handsome stranger was a thief . . . who

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Daughter

By Bill Burchardt

could steal horses just as easily as he had stolen Ellie's heart

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whine of fiddle music left behind. She snugged her shawl about her shoulders. "His name was Choc, Pa."

Lute's whip laid the team into their collars. "I don't like you making up to strangers, daughter."

Della Bristow said, "I was right there, Lute. She went to dance."

"I'd have danced with her," Lute said.

"You went to talk," said his wife.

"Ma would've liked to dance too," suggested Ellie.

Unmindful of the contradiction, Lute mumbled fretfully, "I'm getting to old to caper."

"Except after coon dogs," Ellie giggled.

LUTE gave up, and started to worry silently. It was Cherokee Nation land he was leasing; winter-quarter grass was money due. All his four-year-old harness mules had disappeared in the last big raid. He needed that grass money; he figured while he drove, while he unharnessed in the barn lot and watered the team, and while he walked back to the house.

Della had stacked the mail, neat and unopened, beside the lamp on the table. He could hear Ellie in the lean-to, humming a fiddle tune as she undressed for bed.

Lute wandered around the cabin, looking for his spectacles, then sat down to read. It was in U. S. Marshal Amos Remy's letter —the first one he opened. Lute read, his hands numbing, his face going pale.

Then he yelled, "Ellie! Come in here!"

She came running, tying a calico wrapper around her slim waist. "Why, Pa?"

He slapped the reward notice flat on the table. "There he is!"

"Who?"

"That kid saddletramp you were sparking."

"Pa! I didn't spark him." Her gaze became intent on the black type.

$500 Reward

For information leading to the capture of Jim Allen Buck, alias Choc Buck. Dark complexion, short-cropped hair, easy-going and amiable.

DO NOT BE DECEIVED! THIS MAN IS DANGEROUS!

Notify by wire collect
Deaf Smith County Stockman's Association
Anti-Horsethief Association

Ellie leaned over her father's shoulder to look close. "It couldn't be the same, Pa. He wouldn't tell me his right name if he were an outlaw."

"He didn't. He told you his a-li-as," Lute pointed a calloused finger at the reward poster.

Marshal Remy's careful script read, "Judge Parker is much in sympathy with you. These depredations must be stopped. I have asked my secretary to mail this letter as soon as she receives the enclosed circular from the printer. Will meet you in Rabbit Trap soon thereafter."

What with grass money, and Ellie's crush on a stray no-good to keep his sleep fretful, Lute was glad when it was near enough morning to get up and ride off to the fence fixing he'd left the afternoon before. He cut the trail of the strange horse soon after daylight. Lute started backtracking, figuring it meant a new fence break somewhere.

The trail rounded the cedar brakes, then turned up through the north pasture, twisting and tangling through dry washes and draws. Long before he reached the fence, Deputy Lute Bristow knew the strange horse had a rider. He could see the fence wasn't broken or cut or even down.

Lute turned speculative and deeply thoughtful. If his pasture hadn't already been looted he'd conclude that some horsethief was scouting around. Loose horses don't often jump fences, and this one was newly shod.

Lute neck-rained his saddle mule and rode back to where he'd first cut the trail. He followed it until he was dead sure of what he was thinking. Might as well kill two birds with one rock, he decided, and lifted the mule to an easy canter so as to reach the house about noon.

He ate Della's cowpeas and hogmeat in purposeful silence. Then, as he shoved his chair back from the table, he remarked, "There's a passel of persimmons ripe on the hill beyond the wagon road."

Nobody said anything, so he rubbed his mouth with his napkin and added casually, "A persimmon pie'd go down mighty easy."

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Della kept on gathering up dishes, but Ellie kissed her father's bald spot and said, "All right, Pa. I'll pick a pail before evening."

He went out, tightened the mule's cinch, and rode south till he was deep in the timber. He circled then, following Bird Creek to the rock ledges above the spring, then eased down to a stake-out in the peach orchard. Lute dismounted, tethered the mule, and sat down prepared for a long wait.

HE WATCHED Ellie leave the house, wearing faded jeans and one of Lute's old plaid shirts. She was picking persimmons when the sorrel roan came bounding over the wagon road rise, its rider loose-hipped and easy as if his coming along were the most accidental thing in the world. Lute jogged down the hill. The young fellow was leaning across his saddle horn talking to Ellie.

By the time Lute arrived, Choc was pulling persimmon limbs down so Ellie could could reach them. When he saw Lute, Choc's right hand tensed near the .45 tied down on his thigh. Lute thought, this'll have to be gone at easy. Buck will be a hard man to catch.

Lute held his reins with one hand and leaned the other carefully on his mule's hip, so Choc could see he was not reaching for a gun. He invited Choc to come up to the house with Ellie for supper. While Ellie showed Choc where to wash up, Lute went inside.

Della landed on him like a busted ridgepole. "Lute Bristow, whatever are you thinking of!"

"Now, Mamma—if you want to catch a coyote, you have to hang the bait where he at least *thinks* he can reach it."

The supper talk ran from coon dogs to mules, Lute explaining he raised mules for the Kansas farm market. "There's nothing like a team of mules hitched to the pulling end of a plow."

Choc Buck said, "I ought to know, Mr. Bristow. I've followed mules down plenty of furrows."

"I figured you for a cowhand," Lute said.

Choc's wide grin showed even white teeth. "I've just been a cowboy since I came to Texas. Lots of us boys from the Kiamish aren't satisfied to be allotment Indians all our lives. I've been learning the cow trade; I aim to run my own herd someday. I'd like to fence, and grade up my stock."

Lute said, "Fences might mean guns, in those hills, son." He got up, stepped to the mantle, and unslung the Winchester pegged there. "Of course, it helps if a man's got one of these new repeaters, and knows how to use it." As Deputy Lute Bristow came around, he had the Winchester leveled carefully at where Choc Buck's head had been.

It wasn't there now. Choc was on his feet, his .45 unholstered and pointing straight at Lute Bristow's belly. His wide grin wrinkled the corners of his eyes.

"I'm a fair shot myself, Mr. Bristow, but mostly with a gun like this."

Lute's eyes raised gently to the rafters; there was a light shine of sweat on his forehead. "Well, that's nice, son. I'll just set this Winchester here in the corner. You can look it over after you've finished eating."

Della's fork clattered across her plate and fell on the floor.

Choc said, briskly good-humored, "I reckon I'm finished now. Maybe I'd better be riding."

"No, no!" Lute raised a knotty hand. "We ought to pop some corn, and talk awhile."

Ellie popped the corn noisily at the stove. Lute sat with his chair leaned against the wall, demonstrating the fine points of his new rifle. Squatting beside him, Choc dismantled his .45 piece by piece with the deputy, talking handguns. Then both began reassembling their guns with measured motions, like some strange brand of Russian roulette.

Frustration was starting to show on Lute's wind-burned face. He went off into the cabin lean-to, and came back carrying a jug too full to gurgle.

"This is a mule I don't sell in Kansas," he said, offering the jug.

"White mule?" said Choc, grinning. Any liquor was illegal in Indian Territory.

"Bootleg," Lute agreed. "The law does bind a man sometimes."

THE jug changed hands often in the next hour, and talk thickened and movements became uncertain. Yet somehow the jug still failed to gurgle when tipped.

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Scowling, Lute said thickly, "Yesh, the law binds a man. Thish star I'm wearing doesn't mean anything to me but fees. You take this talk about Swede Charley's operating hereabouts. The Swede's one of the slickest horse thieves west of the Arkansaw, but he doesn't know thish country like I do." Lute winked heavily.

Choc grunted, "Unnh," and wavered to his feet. "I'll thank you, and ride on my way."

He looked at Ellie as she came to stand behind her father, and then he backed slowly toward the door. As Choc's fingers touched the latchstring, Lute came up, gripping the rifle.

"Choc, boy," he drawled, "it's dark and cold outside. I wouldn't think of letting you go. You'll spend the night."

Choc's eyes went wary and dismal, darting from the rifle to Ellie. Lute went on, "I won't have it any other way. Ma and Ellie'll sleep in the lean-to. We can spread our blankets here on the floor."

Della came from behind the wood box, twisting her hands inside her apron. "Lute, you've gone out of your mind!"

"Hush, Ma."

Lute took jug and rifle and stepped into the lean-to. In the darkness he ran a finger down the jug's neck, and touched liquor before he'd passed the first knuckle, Lute had only been pretending to drink, so, apparently, had Choc. Muttering angrily, Lute grabbed a pair of blankets and tramped back.

Ellie confronted him. "Pa," she began.

"Hush, daughter!" Lute said.

Della went heavily to the mantel and lifted the 10-gauge shotgun from beneath the rifle pegs. She took the table lamp and shooed Ellie before her into the lean-to.

Lute said, "Women are sure unpredictable." He threw a blanket to Choc.

Choc backed away, letting the blanket fall on the floor. "Mr. Bristow," he said bluntly, "did you really mean it when you said you knew Swede Charley?"

Lute leaned the rifle against a chair, and sat in it to tug off his boots. "Man's got to be careful *what* he says about Swede Charley," he grunted.

Lute spread his blanket, and lay down on it. He pillowed his head on a bent elbow, glanced at the rifle, and said, "Goodnight, boy."

"Mr. Bristow," Choc said, "hadn't you better put that new rifle back on the pegs over the fireplace? It's apt to get dusty there in the fireplace ashes."

Lute glared. "Don't let it trouble you, son."

Choc lifted his .45 from the holster and held it lovingly. "If it were my gun," he murmured, "I'd be awfully careful with it."

Lute thought awhile, then smothered his wrath and got up stiffly to hang up the rifle. "Maybe you're right, boy. I sure don't want to worry you."

Choc holstered his gun, unbuckled his cartridge belt and wrapped it around the holster, and laid the whole thing on the mantelpiece. In a ballet of matched motion, each lay down and rolled in his blanket. The house quieted.

The fire crackle diminished as the back log burned, until there was only the rustling sound of the glowing coals and the spasmodic pop of a shattering log. It was going to be more of a chore than he'd figured, Lute thought. It was like milking a bobcat. But the boy had to go to sleep sometime. Once he dozed, it would be no trouble.

PASSING the time, Lute took stock of the furniture. Varnish was peeling on the bench-legged walnut table Della had carted doggedly all the way from Springfield. He looked at the chintzy rocker where Della had rocked Ellie to sleep when she was a baby.

Lute remembered a night when Ellie'd had croup, and they dared not lay her down lest she choke to death. He'd gotten his share of rocking, that night. His eyes felt oddly moist around the edges, and his nose needed blowing.

Ellie was grown up and pretty now, and he'd be losing her one of these days; but not to such a worthless young owlhooter as this. He glanced around. Choc Buck seemed to be asleep. Lute sat up, and found Choc's dark eyes staring at him as round and unblinking as a screech owl. Lute lay back and began to count the rafters.

There was a blackness near the eaves; probably a leak starting. He'd have to look into that. It was warm and comfortable here

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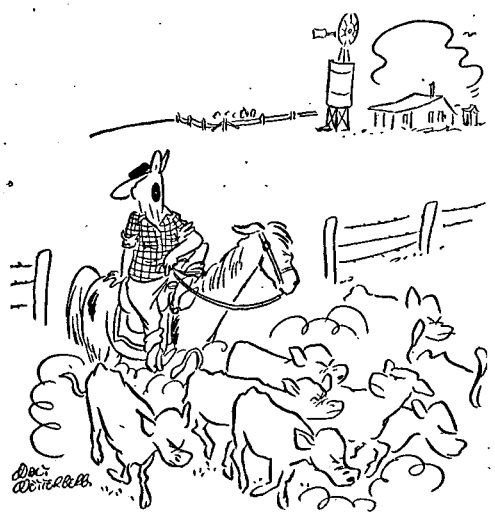
on the floor. Lute felt easy and relaxed; he could wait. He calculated how long it'd been since he'd adzed out those rafters; long enough that he'd forgotten how many there were. Two—four—twelve—fourteen—.

Lute awoke with a start. Wrenching around, he watched Choc's breathing—slow, deep, and regular. Lute eased to an elbow and studied Choc's closed eyelids; there was not a twitch or a flicker. No doubt of it; Choc wasn't playing possum now.

Lute gently folded the blanket away, rose,



"I was waltzing with my darling to the Ten-a-see Wa-altz. . . ."

and padded to the fireplace. He was lifting the Winchester off the pegs—

"Mr. Bristow."

Lute spun, glaring down like a treed coon. Choc Buck's eyes were shut.

"I aimed to tell you, Mr. Bristow. There are no cartridges in that rifle."

"What?"

Choc's eyelids raised. "I thought I heard a racket outside," he explained. "I got up and got the rifle down to look. When I hung it back up—why—there were no shells in it."

"You just happened to notice that, huh?"

Lute scanned the mantelpiece. Choc's .45 was there, along with nine 45/70 cartridges in a neat row beside the gilt-framed tintype of Ellie in her eighth-grade graduation dress.

"When I got to the window I didn't see anything outside after all," Choc said.

Lute roared, "Well, I'll have to load the gun!" He snatched the shells and shoved them back into the magazine. "I heard a stirring outside, myself," he lied.

Choc was up, buckling his gunbelt. "You did? Doggone! I'll go help you look."

Lute stormed out, Choc crowding his heels. Lute headed for the barn, hearing Choc stumble on the unfamiliar sandrock ledges of the path. The mules roused to snorting, as Lute slammed back the barn door. Under cover of the noise he ran, leaving Choc stranded and staring into the blackness of the stable.

Lute crouched in the moist straw of a stall, aiming to skylight Choc against the open door. A mule stamped and blew, and then the barn went quiet. Sliding the rifle barrel across a stanchion, Lute raised himself slowly. The outlaw was gone! He's sneaked into the barn somewhere, Lute thought. He moved against the wall, stalking Choc.

The soft muffled dark seemed alive, feeling, searching. Lute froze motionless against the rough boards. His nose wheezed; he opened his mouth and breathed silently through his throat. Abruptly, senselessly, he had an eerie premonition that one sound from him and a .45 would roar from somewhere in the massive black around him.

Deputy Lute Bristow was sweating, feeling unreasonably hot in the chill night, with wet rivulets running down inside his clothes. "Choc?" the name croaked from Lute's paralyzed larynx, a strangled caw.

Quietly brisk, a foot from Lute's elbow, Choc said, "Mr. Bristow?"

Lute's chest shrunk like wet wool. "I don't think there's anything out here."

"I don't believe there is," Choc agreed.

LUTE felt his way to the door. They marched back into the house, and Lute shook the cinders down in the cookstove. "Might as well make some coffee," he said. "It isn't long till morning. I don't reckon I could sleep any more, anyhow."

"I'm kind of wide awake myself." Choc stretched broad shoulders.

Lute dipped water and coffee, stoked up a blaze, and waited with tired, burning nerves.

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The night grew gray, becoming mist-laden morning, and Deputy Lute Bristow was a haggard man summoning strength from a cup of black coffee.

The cornshuck mattress in the lean-to stirred, crackling. Della came in, hair stringy, wearing the rumpled dress she'd slept in. She glowered at Lute and poured coffee.

"Your eyes look like ailing blowflies," she pronounced crossly.

"Looks like Choc will be staying for dinner." Lute rattled huskily.

Choc said, "Now, look here, Mr. Bristow—"

Ellie came in from the lean-to. Her eyes were bright as bluebirds, her cheeks pink, and her hair was freshly combed. She smiled past Choc, at her father.

Choc said, "Well—Mr. Bristow—"

He'd stay till judgement day, Lute thought grimly. "Soon as you and Ellie drink a cup of coffee, I want you to hitch up and drive over to Ike Mond's," Lute told Della. "Bring back a couple of frying chickens. Breakfast can wait."

Lute sat moodily when Della and Ellie had left, listening to the sound of harnessing in the barn lot, feeling guilty about not helping them, yet knowing better than to get far from that rifle again—and certain he didn't want his hands tangled in a bunch of harness straps. He heard the wagon pull out.

Now comes the showdown, Lute decided, man for man, a straight even-break shootout with the fastest gun the winner. On opposite sides of the cabin, chairs leaned back, boot heels on the rounds, they measured each other.

Lute felt like an old pasture bull, challenged and set on holding his ground. He could think of good arguments why Choc ought to give himself up, but the silent young Choctaw didn't look like he'd favor a debating society. Lute groaned and got up.

Choc stood; Lute eased across to the fireplace. Choc drifted along. He aims to stay close enough not to miss, Lute speculated. The fire in the grate had burned down to a heap of sputtering coals. Lute dawdled, wanting time; he picked up a chunk of wood, lifting it from woodbox to fire. Then, past the sputtering flames, he came up with a howl and hurled the cord length of rough-barked blackjack wood.

Choc blocked with his elbow, fading. The blackjack chunk glanced and hit his face. Lute watched, jigging with panic, as Choc went down. The deputy grabbed his blanket off the floor, ripped strips, rolled young Choc, and trussed him like a sacked coon. Then Lute jumped and ran to the window.

He had heard a horse on the rock ledges of the yard road, and someone was dismounting out there to open the barbed-wire gate. Lute ran back. He stuffed a gag in Choc's mouth, pausing to examine Choc's bark-skinned cheek, then bolted erect as if a hot poker had jabbed his back. He knew that voice that was hailing the house!

Deputy Lute Bristow jigged in high glee. He scratched his bald spot in a moment's indecision, dragged Choc out of sight behind the lean-to curtain, hitched up his belt, and strolled calmly to open the cabin door.

"Light and cool your saddle, marshal," Lute greeted.

United States Marshal Amos Remy was a small, spare man, his face bluish red from the cold. He pumped his deputy's hand.

"I had hoped to be here sooner, much sooner, Bristow. Believe I saw your wife and daughter on the wagon road." He was still puffing from the exertion of climbing in and out of the saddle to open the gate.

"Might have," Lute said. "They headed for Ike Mond's, over at Rabbit Trap, to buy some produce for dinner."

"Mrs. Remy and I spent the night with Ike. Cut across country this morning to save time. Ike was almighty pleased to know we've caught your horse thieves. Recovered your stock, too."

A slight chill cooled Deputy Bristow's flesh, and he shut the door quickly. Marshal Remy drew off his riding gloves.

"Swede Charley's boys were driving your mules to Kansas to trade for horses they could sell to the army. Your stock is corraled in Muscogee; you can pick them up any time."

THE marshal stumbled over a blackjack chunk in the middle of the floor. He kicked it into the sputtering fire, sat down, and stretched out his feet. "Chilly in here, don't you think?"

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It seemed bitterly cold to Deputy Bristow. The marshal said, "I had a scheme, but I'm glad we didn't have to use it. Young fellow named Choc Buck offered to ride in here, try to get in as a spy with the rustlers. I had some dodgers printed like that sample I sent you, but I'm glad we won't have to use them. The boy's mother is Mrs. Remy's cousin, and Mrs. Remy didn't approve of subjecting the lad to such danger."

The loud, ringing sound in Lute's ears grew and settled into the iron clang of wagon wheels banging up the rocky grade into the yard.

"He's a mighty fine boy," said the marshal, "and fine for the job. He wouldn't have been known hereabouts. He rides for the Anti-Horsethief Association over in Deaf Smith County."

The door burst in to admit arm-waving women. Lute dodged Ellie, then Della, but as a little banty-hen of a woman squawked by, he eased off into the lean-to. Numbly, he hauled a wide-eyed Choc Buck out by the armpits, and dumped him. Three shrieking women gathered around him, jerking out the gag, plucking off the blanket strips.

Young Choc shrugged loose, sat up, grinned, and rubbed his scraped cheek.

"Choc, my boy," demanded the marshal, "how did this happen?"

Choc said, "Mr. Remy, I didn't know what to do. I finally decided to let Mr. Bristow take me—as long as there was no shooting—then get identified and clear out of here. Before that I kind of aimed to take Mr. Bristow myself, on account of some things Miss Ellie said at the sociable, and some things Mr. Bristow said himself. But he had such a nice family—" Choc glanced helplessly at Ellie.

"Choc Buck!" Ellie burst out, aghast. "What did I tell you at the sociable?"

"You said your father knew personally all the owlhoots in Going Snake District."

"Goodness alive," Ellie declared, sweetly amazed. "Isn't a deputy *supposed* to know outlaws? Choc Buck, if you're a lawman yourself you should know a deputy's daughter after you've danced with her half the night! If you'd just told Pa—"

"I was right happy to know you, Miss Ellie," Choc pleaded urgently. "But I figured it was just manners to wait another evening or so before I told your Pa how I felt about you."

Coming up in the next issue

TORMENT TRAIL

Cleve had nothing in common with the outlaws . . . but the girl they all wanted to have and the man they all wanted to kill

A Magazine-Length Novel

By GIFF CHESHIRE

LONGHORN STAMPEDE

Men died and trail herds disappeared in Tiburon City . . . and the woman who knew its secrets was too frightened to talk

Beginning an Exciting Serial

By PHILIP KETCHUM

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Renegade's Girl

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

WHEN Judge Gorine rapped his gavel to adjourn the Montana Kid's murder trial, Mel Hollister slipped to the jury chamber. He couldn't face the ordeal of friends flocking around to congratulate him. His brother's bushwhacker had been sentenced to hang, an event which would shortly be toasted in Sage City's barrooms. But Hollister felt no cause for celebration. He was alone now. A hanging wouldn't bring Bob Hollister back.

He waited until he was sure Sheriff McConnick had had time to lock up the condemned man, before emerging from hiding and slipping downstairs to the jail office to pick up the fleece-lined jumper he had left there. He dreaded the lonesome ride back to Rafter H, the foothills ranch he and Bob had hewn from the raw wilderness of the Bitterroots.

Hollister stepped into the glow of the hot stove in the

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DEPUTY MEL HOLLISTER wanted to learn how Betty fit into the outlaw scheme . . . though he knew it meant almost certain death to find out. . . .

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sheriff's office, a tall and leaned-down man of twenty-six whose flaming red hair and humorous gray eyes were nearly identical to those of the murdered Bob Hollister.

Sage City's veteran sheriff was working at papers on his desk. He looked up, not knowing exactly what to say to Mel.

"Well," he ventured awkwardly, "justice works fast here in the Territory. The trial lasted only four hours. If my train doesn't get snowbound crossing the divide tonight, I'll have the Montana Kid behind the bars at Canyonville by daylight tomorrow."

Mel took out makings and absently began building a smoke. Why was it people couldn't grasp the real truth of the situation—that the Montana Kid was just a cog in a wheel, the rear guard which Vance Overmire's Bitterroot Gang had left behind that night, to cover their getaway with Rafter H's stolen horse herd?

"It was like snipping off a snake's rattles and turning him loose, Wick," Mel Hollister said heavily. "The fangs are still as poisonous as ever. Overmire will replace the Kid. Maybe I'll build up another herd, and for what? To bait the Bitterroot Gang out of the hills for another strike?"

Embarrassment touched the old sheriff. Coming from anyone else, McConnick might have taken Mel's bitter outburst for criticism of the way he was running his office. It still stung Wick McConnick, knowing that Vance Overmire had broken jail the first year McConnick was in office, after being caught red-handed on a rustler raid. Overmire had fled to the hills and organized the Bitterroot Gang, defying the attempts of posses to smoke out his hideaway.

"Yeah," the sheriff said heavily, "I wish it were Overmire I was hauling over to the hangman at Canyonville. I'm leaving on the two-fifteen train, Mel. Maybe the Montana Kid will get panicky and decide to tell us where Overmire's wild bunch operates."

Sid Clark, the veteran jailer, came in from the bullpen where he had taken a last tray of grub to the Montana Kid.

"The town," Clark said, "is laying odds you won't make it to Canyonville with the Kid. He was Overmire's top hand. The gang won't let him get as far as the gallows."

McConnick pulled in a heavy breath. "I've lost only one prisoner in my years behind the star," he said. "I won't lose the Kid."

Hollister saw the jailer grin skeptically. He knew Clark was jealous of the sheriff's superior rank. "The Kid just got through bragging he wasn't born to hang," Clark said. "Know what I think? I think the Kid expects Overmire's bunch to waylay your train this side of the pass and take him away from you."

McConnick's mouth hardened under his tawny dragoon mustache. Even before the trial, Sage City had been positive the Bitterroot Gang would never let their henchman get to Canyonville's death house.

"You're the third man who's said I'm a fool for handcuffing myself to the Kid and heading over the mountains by train," the old lawman said. "But I have a court order to do it, and I won't welsh on that. Overmire'd have to kill me to take the Kid."

Mel Hollister waited until the jailer had left the office before he said gravely, "Wick, he's right. That jerkwater railroad goes through pretty lonesome country. It would be easy to stop a train. And Vance Overmire's sworn to get you someday. You were the man who forced him to leave his ranch and go on the dodge."

McConnick said fatalistically, "The judge gave me my orders. I've got my duty to do. It's no worry of yours, Mel."

Hollister lifted his jumper from a wall hook and shrugged into it. If he left town now, he could make it back to Rafter H before dark.

"I'm beginning to wonder," he mused, "if I made a mistake not gunning the Kid down after I saw him bushwhack Bob, instead of bringing him back to Sage to stand trial."

The sheriff's piercing eyes softened. He had known the twin Hollister boys since they were knee-high to a leppie, and loved them both as if they were his own flesh and blood.

"No, Mel. You aren't cut out to take the law into your own hands. You did right. Now the Kid's life isn't on your conscience."

A weighty silence built up between the two old friends. Suddenly Mel Hollister knew what he was obliged to do.

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"Wick," he said impulsively, "I want you to deputize me and take me along to help ride herd on the Kid. The two of us could stand off Overmire's gang."

For a long moment, Wick McConnick appeared to be debating Mel's offer. Then, without speaking, he reached in a desk drawer and took out a silver badge engraved DEPUTY SHERIFF. He stood up and pinned it solemnly to the cowboy's leather vest.

"I'm obliged more than I can say, Mel," the old man said. "Our train leaves at two-fifteen. Once we get over the summit we'll be safe. Overmire couldn't ride through the pass with his men without being spotted by the station agent. If we find out he has, we'll be forewarned and can make a fight of it."

Mel Hollister left the jail office to see about stabling his Rafter H horse until he got back from Canyonville. He was thinking, anything to put off going back to Rafter H, to that empty house, picking up where Bob and I left off.

THE little rattletrap train out of Sage City took on water at the summit of the pass around midnight. For the two lawmen taking the Montana Kid to Canyonville to die, the long hours of suspense were over when they reached the pass.

The station agent at Summit was positive in his report. "Only one rider's passed here in the last week, and that was a girl from some ranch down below, heading for Skytop to pick up mail and supplies."

So the gloomy prophets down in Sage had been wrong. If Vance Overmire's gang had had any intention of rescuing the Montana Kid, they would have done it before now.

He and the sheriff would not stick around the prison to see the Montana Kid mount the gallows. Both of them were agreed that the execution of one of Vance Overmire's gunhawks solved nothing, so far as the beleaguered foothill ranchers were concerned.

The Bitterroot Gang was still secure in its unknown hideout in the wilderness of the west slope of the Bitterroot range, and they would continue to make their rustling raids. They had been doing it for ten years now, ever since Vance Overmire, once a foothill rancher himself, had been caught rustling. He had escaped from McConnick's jail, then had organized a lawless band.

With the train rolling downgrade, Mel gave up trying to find a comfortable position on the bristly mohair seat of the day coach. The railroad was built for hauling ore from the mines, not hauling passengers; the unbalasted roadbed made travel as rough as forking a bucking bronc. But in wintertime, with the stage road blocked by snowdrifts, this was the only way they could reach Canyonville.

Opposite Hollister's seat, the Montana Kid and the sheriff were dozing handcuffed wrist to wrist. The old sheriff, now that the danger of a train holdup was past, was taking a well-earned snooze, but Hollister noticed that McConnick's free hand was closed around the butt of his six-shooter.

The Kid's looking mighty easy in the mind, Hollister mused to himself. But he knows that the minute we passed the divide his chance of rescue was gone.

The Montana Kid—he had given no other name at the trial—was around Mel's age, and, like Hollister, a fiery red-head. He did not appear to notice the vile-smelling, overheated coach which made Hollister so miserable. From the moment they had stepped aboard at Sage, the Kid had been as easy-going and high-spirited as a man could be.

For the past couple of hours he had catnapped, as unconcerned as if he were on a pleasure trip. His hat was over his eyes, and a faintly sardonic grin showed under his red mustache.

Hollister found himself wondering what had led this kid to take the wrong fork of the trail, somewhere in the past. Why had he joined an outfit like the Bitterroot Gang, which was blazing a trail of rustling and murder as far south as Wyoming?

During the trial the Montana Kid had displayed a cool reserve and a macabre sense of humor, grinning when the jury filed in with a guilty verdict, laughing out loud when the judge intoned the death sentence.

Have to give him credit for one thing, Mel thought; this Montana Kid had a virtue supposedly lacking among thieves—an un-

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wavering loyalty to his breed. The Montana Kid had refused to reveal where Vance Overmire's gang had its hideout, even when the judge hinted that the Kid's death sentence might be changed to a few year's imprisonment, if he revealed the gang's secrets.

Looking at the Kid, as they sat so close their knees touched, Hollister wondered if this young outlaw had ever known what it was to be loved by a woman. Probably not, otherwise he wouldn't have atced like a rabid wolf, killing for the sheer pleasure of killing.

That's how it had been with Bob Hollister's murder—no valid excuse for it at all. The Montana Kid had been left behind to cover the rustlers' getaway into the hills. Bob Hollister had been camped over in the valley to guard the Rafter H horse herd, which was on winter graze. His horse had been shot from under him when the rustlers struck. On foot he couldn't have been any threat to Overmire's bunch.

And yet the Kid had chosen to gun Bob Hollister down from ambush, shooting him in the back with a deer rifle. Mel, riding over from Rafter H to relieve his brother, had witnessed the shooting.

Many times in the past several days Mel Hollister had searched his own soul, wondering why he hadn't gunned down the Montana Kid. Instead he had stalked the Kid, got the drop on him, disarmed him, and returned him to the sheriff's office in Sage.

UP AHEAD in the night, the wood-burning locomotive vented an eerie whistle, which echoed from the snow-covered walls of the gulch the tracks were threading. Brakeshoes bit into the wheels of the coach, making a jerky reduction of speed that jounced McConnick awake. The train was approaching a settlement of some kind.

Mel Hollister leaned forward and scrubbed a shirt sleeve against the moisture-rimmed car window.

He had a blurred glimpse of mining dumps wheeling past outside, with starshine glinting on the haphazard roofs of the dozen or so shacks of a small town.

The conductor poked his head into the car and bawled, "Skytop Mine. Twenty-minute stop for wood and water. Last chance to eat this side of Canyonville.

Sheriff McConnick got to his feet and yawned, stretching the arm that wasn't fettered to his prisoner. The Montana Kid was awake now, and was peering out the window at the lights of the little railroad depot as the train lurched to a stop.

"I haven't eaten since noon, at Sage," the sheriff said. "Think I'll grab a cup of coffee."

Mel Hollister nodded. "I'll ride herd on the Kid."

The half-dozen other passengers who shared the unventilated car stared drowsily at the sheriff as he unlocked the handcuffs and handed the key over to his deputy.

"We're over the hump, but we'll take no chances even so," Wick McConnick said, standing by as the Hollister notched the handcuffs over his wrist. "Watch him like you would a bull rattler."

The sheriff made his way out of the car. Through the window, Hollister saw him vanish around the station house toward an all-night restaurant across the camp's single street. The station platform was completely deserted, except for a lanky telegraph operator who emerged from the depot toting a mail sack up to the train's express car.

The Montana Kid said, "It's stuffy as an Injun tepee in this car. We've been riding for ten hours. How about stretching our legs out on the platform till the sheriff gets back?"

Hollister opened his mouth to deny the request, then reconsidered. His own joints felt stiff and sore from the half-day's journey behind them; it was like riding in an ore crusher, the way this car bucked and whipped around the mountain curves.

His nostrils were repelled by the blended stinks of the car: kerosene leaking from the ceiling lamps, the unwashed bodies of the other passengers, the excessive heat from the pot-bellied stove sitting in its box of sand at the far end. He had felt smothered for hours.

"OK," he said. "Fresh air will feel good."

The Montana Kid came to his feet, head level with Mel's. They were both over six feet tall in their spike-heeled cowboots, not including the added loft of their stetsons.

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As they stepped out into the aisle, a whisky drummer on the opposite side said, "This time of night it's ten above zero out there, officer."

Hollister mopped perspiration from his neck with a bandanna. A man would be inviting pneumonia, all right, to step out of this fetid bakeoven into the icy temperatures of a mining camp above the six-thousand-foot level, in February.

"We'll put on our coats," Hollister told the Kid. He dragged his sheepskin jumper and the Montana Kid's blanket coat from the overhead baggage rack.

To get into the garments required that Hollister unlock the handcuff from his wrist; but he was careful to step well out of the Kid's reach, his every sense on guard against a false move.

When they had buttoned and belted the heavy garments, the red-headed outlaw glanced down at the iron cuff dangling from his sleeve and said, "You're packing a gun, Hollister. This bracelet hurts like hell. How about leaving it off, just for ten mniutes? no risk to you."

Mel Hollister transferred one of his Colt .45s from its holster to the big pocket of his jumper, not wanting to bother with buckling his shell belts on the outside for so short a time outside the car. He was tempted to agree with the Kid, that there was no reason for them to be shackled together, but McConnick had warned him repeatedly not to take any unnecessary chances with a prisoner as desperate as this one.

"No dice, Kid," Hollister said, notching the loose cuff back on his wrist. "You might try to make a break for it, knowing it would be your last chance this side of Canyonville. And I'd have to shoot you in the back. Or is that what you want?"

The Montana Kid shrugged indifferently and preceded the deputy up the aisle. "What difference does it make how I cash in my chips? You'd probably get a heap more satisfaction doing the job yourself, in the line of duty, than leaving me to stretch hemp."

"If I'd wanted your blood on my hands, I'd have gunned you down the night you drygulched my brother," Hollister said. "Open the door."

THE Montana Kid shoved a shoulder against the coach door, and both men gasped involuntarily as the frigid night air hit their lungs. The station agent stared at the handcuffed men curiously, as he toted a mail sack toward the depot and watched Hollister and his prisoner alight from the coach steps.

"You're a fool, Hollister," the outlaw muttered, as they started walking along the plank platform beside the car. "I didn't give your brother a fighting chance. Why'd you spare me?"

Mel's jaw hardened. He would be glad when he and McConnick were on their way back, alone. It was not a pleasant chore, taking a man to his executioner—even when the man deserved to die as much as this Montana Kid did.

Skytop camp appeared totally deserted at this hour of the night. Down the track, the engine crew was loading cordwood into the tender. The looming bulk of the depot, its roof showing piebald patches, where the snow had melted off the shingles, cut off Hollister's view of the shacks across the street.

The night was bitterly cold, and they had to walk fast to keep the throbbing pain out of their joints. They were beyond the range of the day coach's windows, lost in the inky shadows under the awning of a freight warehouse. Inside the depot, the telegraph sounder made its brittle clatter.

A night breeze hummed mournfully on icicle-hung wires overhead. Under the stars, the snow and ice of the gulch wall made a phosphorous-like glow, outlining the shafthouses and tipple hoists and headframes of the mine which was this settlement's reason for being.

"Kid," Mel Hollister said, "you still have time to talk. Why don't you?"

"Talk?" scoffed the red-head outlaw. "I did all the talking I was going to do inside the courtroom."

Hollister replied, knowing argument was hopeless, "You're just a two-bit gunman, Kid. You could buy your way out of a noose if you told McConnick where Overmire dens up. What do you owe Vance Overmire? What have you got to gain by shielding him?"

The Montana Kid laughed softly.

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They had reached the end of the station platform. The raw pure air felt like a tonic, the sting of the cold was a welcome balm to cheeks made raw by the long hours inside the stuffy car.

Turning back, they had reached the alley between warehouse and depot, when an overhead timber brushed the stetson off Mel Hollister's red head.

As he leaned forward into the glare of light from the telegraph office's bay window to retrieve the hat, a voice snapped suddenly from the alley, "Stay ducked, Montana Kid!"

Hollister looked up from his crouched position, involuntarily gasping out "What?" even as he saw the shadowy figure of the night telegrapher swinging a miner's sledge at the Montana Kid's head.

It was all over in an instant: the sickening crunch of the ten-pound maul on bone, the Kid's backward collapse, the telegrapher's whispered order as he tossed the hammer to one side.

"Drag him into the baggage room, Kid, and we'll get those irons off you."

Mel Hollister's first instinct was to jerk the sixgun out of his pocket. But he checked the impulse, instantly realizing what had happened here.

This telegrapher was in league with Overmire's gang. He had struck down the Montana Kid, thinking he had hit the Kid's guard.

It was a natural enough mistake to make, especially as it was obvious the telegrapher did not know the Montana Kid personally. Hollister's law badge was out of sight under his jumper; he wore no gun to identify him as the lawman instead of the prisoner. And the station agent apparently knowing the Montana Kid was red-headed, had had a good look at Hollister's rusty topknot before he swung the sledge hammer.

The telegrapher was reaching down to seize the Kid's arm. "Hurry up," he whispered in panic. "You have to be long gone before that sheriff gets back. I'll go back to my key and pretend I didn't hear any scuffle."

The two of them dragged the Montana Kid into the alleyway. A sliding door trundled open in the darkness; then they were pulling their limp burden into a baggage room.

"Overmire rigged this?" Hollister asked in a steely whisper.

"Yeah. He has horses waiting for you down the tracks, and a guide to hustle you over the pass. I'll strike a match and we'll get at those handcuffs. I have a chisel ready."

ONCE MORE, Mel Hollister refrained from pulling a gun. If someone were waiting here in Skytop with getaway horses, it would be a member of the Bitterroot Gang, possibly Vance Overmire himself. If Hollister played his cards right, and went on impersonating the Montana Kid, he might capture Overmire.

"No, don't show a light!" Hollister whispered. "I know the pocket where this deputy keeps the key to the irons."

It could be a fatal mistake to let this telegrapher see the Montana Kid's red hair. He didn't want trouble with this man, when bigger game was waiting somewhere close.

"Where are the horses?" Hollister said, reaching under his jumper for the handcuff key. "Who's with 'em—Overmire, maybe?"

The telegrapher whispered nervously, "Not Overmire. I don't know who it is; I only know I got paid five hundred dollars to pull this off, and I want you out of here. The horses are down the tracks past the ore-loading chute, that's all I know."

Metal clicked as Hollister got the iron shackle unlocked from his wrist. He stood up, suddenly realizing that he hadn't heard the Montana Kid breathing.

He pulled the sixgun from his pocket now, dimly making out the telegrapher's shape against a seep of light through a crack in the partition behind him.

"You earned your pay, friend," Hollister said. "I'll see that Overmire finds out."

He swung the gun with all his strength, aiming for the telegrapher's cap. At this close range, one blow was all that was needed. Overmire's confederate went down like a pole-axed animal, without so much as a grunt. Fumbling for his arm in the darkness, Mel Hollister handcuffed the man to the Kid.

Hollister got a match from his levis pocket and scratched it aflame. One look at the bloody dent on the Montana Kid's temple told him that his brother's slayer was dead.

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Sweating with tension, Hollister went back outside and slid the door shut. He wished he could run across the street and get McConnick, but there was no time for that. Timing was the key to this whole business. The Montana Kid's accomplice would be expecting out this masquerade. He wished he had taken a moment to get into the Kid's mackinaw, but it was too late for that now.

His boots made their loud abrasive crunching on the cinders, as he headed down the track toward the looming bulk of the ore

Here in the open, Mel knew he was a prime target for the gunmen

him right away at the ore chute where the horses were waiting.

Back on the platform, Hollister snatched up his stetson and, keeping to the awning's darkness, skirted the warehouse and headed down the ramp. He was in open starlight now, and knew he was being watched by a gun-hung member of the Bitterroot Gang.

It was a gamble, maybe, but worth the risk, in view of what was at stake. All McConnick needed to clean out a rustler's nest was one member of the gang who could be forced to talk, to betray the secret of Vance Overmire's well-guarded hideout in the Bitterroot badlands.

Hollister told himself that he was near enough to the Montana Kid's build to carry chute. He kept his hatbrim pulled low to cover his face. He wanted to break into a run, but he knew a fugitive wouldn't do that, on account of the noise it would cause.

He was abreast of the ore chute now; he saw no sign of man or horses in the shadows there. Maybe he was walking into a trap; maybe the way he walked would betray his imposture, if one of the Montana Kid's close associates were waiting there.

Hollister thought grimly, no wonder the Kid was so confident tonight. Overmire must have arranged this even before the trial, planting men in Skytop, east of the pass, where the sheriff's guard would be down.

And the plot had almost succeeded—except that a case of mistaken identity had resulted

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in the Kid's death. It galled Hollister to realize that the Montana Kid had deliberately tricked him into leaving the coach, knowing rescue awaited him here in Skytop.

RIGHT hand thrust deep in his pocket, holding the Colt .45 ready for business, Mel Hollister stepped down to the apron of the roadbed when he reached the overhang of the ore chute.

"Montana—over here."

The voice, expected though it was, startled Hollister when it came, from the shadows directly alongside him. But it was the source of that voice that unnerved him. It belonged to a woman!

Hollister whirled, thumb taut on the gun-hammer. "Who is it?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

A girl stepped out of the shadows before him—the girl, he knew, who the Summit station master had seen crossing the pass late yesterday. She came barely to his shoulder, and was wearing a man's buffalo coat and a flat-crowned hat. She wasn't carrying a gun.

"You don't know me," she said stiffly. "I'm Roe Standish's daughter from the Oro Fino spread. I've rented a horse here in town for your getaway. Come on."

The girl turned and headed along the side of the ore chute, leaving Mel Mollister standing beside the tracks with his brain in a whirl, set off-balance by this unexpected twist of events. He heard the swift strike of her boots beyond the ore chute, heading up the snow-crusted slope behind it, not looking back to see if he were coming.

Indecision touched Hollister. He had come here primed to swap lead with a waiting rustler, not a young woman whose father's name meant nothing at all to him. It was someone connected with Vance Overmire, obviously. That fact alone sent Mel Hollister after the mysterious figure ahead.

He started climbing the gulch slope, trying to make up his mind as to his next move. Should he take Roe Standish's daughter into custody, and march her back to face the sheriff? To do so might ruin the whole thing. It was Vance Overmire's hangout he was seeking; this girl might have no clues as to that secret.

Scrambling up the icy slope toward the dark background of the timber, the girl already vanishing into the undergrowth above, Hollister told himself, she's just a messenger sent over to Skytop with instructions to bribe that telegraph man. If she doesn't know the Montana Kid by sight, I ought to be able to sound her out before we ride too far.

Fifty yards into the timber and the trail opened on a clearing atop an old tailing heap. He saw the girl waiting at the edge of the trees, with two hobbled saddle horses.

Pausing to recover his breath, Hollister peered behind him. He could look straight down onto the peaked roof of the Skytop depot, and could see the standing train. He saw the conductor carry his lantern up the rear platform of the day coach; then he saw the familiar figure of Sheriff McConnick crossing the station platform and joining the conductor at the rear door of the coach, just as the train started moving.

Staring fascinated, Hollister saw the train draw out of sight around a bend of the tracks, with McConnick and the railroader still talking on the coach platform. He realized that the sheriff probably intended to enjoy a cigar out there in the fresh air before going inside. He might be miles on his way before he discovered that his deputy and his prisoner were no longer aboard. Hollister was on his own now.

"Well," came the girl's caustic voice above the dying echoes of the train's departing rumble, "are you going to spend the night admiring the scenery, or are we going to ride?"

Hollister turned and made his way across the ankle-deep snow, still keeping his hat brim low, even though he knew now that the Montana Kid must be a stranger to this girl.

As he reached the horses he saw the girl unhobble a bay gelding and step into stirrups. Her face looked etheral, beautiful, in the soft starlight. She was around twenty, and the hair showing under her stetson was corn-tassle blonde.

"I'd expected Overmire or one of the boys," Hollister said, squatting to slip the hobbles off the remaining horse, a big white-stockinged sorrel stallion.

Picking up her reins, the girls said with deep sarcasm, "Overmire always plays it safe;

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you know that. He couldn't bring a bunch of men over the pass without being spotted. Sending Roe Standish's girl was the easy way to snatch your bacon out of the fire, Montana."

HOLLISTER stood up, the horse between him and the girl, while he hooked a stirrup over the horn and inspected the cinch.

"Thought I was a goner, when we passed the summit," he said. "How'd Overmire work it, anyhow? I only left Sage City at two."

The girl shrugged indifferently. "Alamo was at the trial, and he knew you'd be on this train. He rode straight for the ranch and I came on over the pass with Overmire's bribe money. Overmire had it all planned, knowing they'd send you to Canyonville."

Hollister said, "You have the advantage of me. What did you say your name was?"

"Betty. Hurry it up or I'll leave without you."

"You don't sound very happy about helping me beat the noose, Betty," Hollister drawled, unhooking the oxbow from the horn.

Betty Standish reined her horse around, facing a wagon road which snaked off through the timber in the direction of the Pass.

"I've heard enough about you to know you're no better than a rabid wolf, Montana—like Overmire and all the others."

Hollister swung aboard the rented horse and spurred after the girl, the rebuff making his heart sing. Maybe he had found an ally in Betty Standish. But he had to play this safe, string her along, pry information out of her.

They were heading down the timber-walled road now, a road which undoubtedly flanked the rails through the pass, over onto the western slope into Overmire's stamping ground. He felt safe enough, this side of Summit; beyond that point, he could be running into trouble.

"Where's Overmire?" he asked.

Betty Standish kept facing straight ahead. "Laying low at the Roost, of course. You weren't important enough for him to risk his hide over, Montana. He forced Dad into letting a woman pull his chestnuts out of the fire."

Topping a ridge, Betty spurred her horse into a gallop, obviously not in the mood for talk. Hollister, jogging along at the same clip, let his thoughts revert to Sheriff McConnick.

Along about now, the lawman was probably making the grim discovery that his deputy and prisoner were not aboard the train. McConnick would probably commandeer the conductor into bringing him back to Skytop station to investigate.

It would take some time, most likely, for the sheriff to find the telegrapher handcuffed to the Montana Kid's corpse inside the Skytop baggage room. It made Hollister grin, visualizing how perplexed old Wick would be, trying to figure that one out. He probably wouldn't find out much from the telegrapher, since a murder was involved.

The wagon road dipped down to the railroad right-of-way and had petered out into a trail by the time they reached the station at Summit.

Hollister had an uneasy moment, wondering if the agent he and the sheriff had talked to less than an hour before would spot him and Betty Standish riding past. But the windows were dark; the agent had gone to bed.

Out of the pass, Betty turned southwesterly into the maw of a nameless canyon. From here on, Mel Hollister knew he was playing a suicide game.

"I'm all mixed up on directions," Hollister said, when they reined up to let their horses blow. "How far are we riding tonight? To the Roost?"

Betty looked around, staring at him in a way which made him wonder if he had made a serious slip. But she only said, "You'll pick up another horse when we reach our place, and then you'll go back to your snake den alone."

Hollister resisted an impulse to unbutton his jumper and let her see his law badge. He couldn't be sure how far to trust Betty Standish's hatred of the Montana Kid, knowing that she had some connection with Vance Overmire's outlaw bunch. If she became aware of his true identity, she might clam up and spoil everything. Better play along, he decided, until more cards have been dealt in this game.

"I'm right sorry, Betty," he said, "that you keep comparing me to wolves and snakes. I'm

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not a bad feller when you get to know me."

Without warning, the girl's hand came up from the back side of her swellfork saddle pommel, and Mel Hollister found himself looking into the black muzzle of a Colt she had holstered to the pommel.

"I've been expecting that kind of talk," Betty Standish said angrily. "It's common talk you fancy yourself to be a lady killer, Montana. Don't get fresh with me."

MEL BLEW on his fingers to warm them. He discovered that he had taken a keen liking to this girl who found herself out in the middle of nowhere on a winter night, guiding a man she had every reason to believe was a desperate criminal snatched off a gallows trap.

"I think you've got a gun in your pocket," Betty went on. "Hand it over. Butt first."

Mel Hollister blinked in pretended dismay. "Now hold on, Betty. Where would I get a gun? You forgetting that an hour ago I was handcuffed to a Johnny Law?"

Betty's .45 made a double click as it came to full cock.

"I know that Jim Peasley knocked that sheriff out of the play, or you wouldn't have gotten loose. You wouldn't have left that depot without grabbing your guard's gun. Hand it over."

Still grinning, Mel Hollister reached carefully into his jumper coat and pulled out his Colt, gripping it by the barrel. He leaned from saddle to lay the cedar butt in Betty's outstretched palm, and saw her thrust the weapon into a cantle bag.

"That's better," she said. "Now ride on ahead. We'll be trailed out of Skytop, as soon as it gets daylight and that train conductor wires back the news that he lost a couple of passengers. We've got to reach Oro Fino Creek before sun-up."

Hollister nodded, picked up his reins, and spurred the sorrel forward, giving it its head down the canyon. It was a comfort, feeling the bulk of his other sixgun holstered inside his jumper.

An hour later, just as daylight was beginning to streak the Bitterroot skyline behind them, the trail left the canyon they had been following and ended at a ford over the rushing waters of a shallow creek, half covered over with ice.

"From here on—" Betty spoke for the first time since relieving him of his gun—"we keep to the water. Try not to make any fresh breaks in the ice that a posse could spot."

This stream, Hollister deduced, must be the Oro Fino. But which direction should he turn his horse? Out in midstream, finding that the sorrel was not going to help him out, Hollister rode a hunch and turned his horse upstream.

At once the girl following him called out, "Just where do you think you're going?"

I turned the wrong way, Hollister thought, and reined up and hipped around to face his hostile companion. In the first break of ruddy daylight, Betty Standish looked even younger than she had by starshine. Her eyes were a deep, warm blue, but they were definitely unfriendly.

"I told you I was all mixed up in my directions," he said lamely. "Looked like the Oro Fino to me."

"Of course it's the Oro Fino. But you know we're above Dad's ranch. You know the Roost isn't north of the railroad."

Hollister tugged off his stetson and ran half-frozen fingers through his shock of red hair. He had played this hand as long as he dared; he had to reveal himself to this girl now and take his chances. If she hated the Montana Kid, maybe she hated Vance Overmire as well. But one thing was certain; he had to beat Betty Standish to the draw before he played his ace.

"Betty," he said, fumbling at the belt of his jumper, "I've got to tell you something. I—"

He broke off as he saw the girl's eyes suddenly shifted from him, to stare across the creekbed. At that same instant a strike of iron-shod hoofs on rock sent a stab of panic through Mel Hollister.

He jerked his head around in time to see a rider break from the brush where the trail climbed the far bank—a rider in his middle forties, whose salt-gray beard was tied in a double braid under his jaw.

The man held a Winchester on Mel Hollister. He was wearing a miner's double-breasted blue woolen shirt and a coontail cap with earflaps tied under his jaw with a thong.

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"Am I glad to see *you*, Dad!" Betty Standish called out. "I was beginning to get sick and tired of this job."

ROE STANDISH swung out of stirrups without pulling his rifle off Hollister. He loomed bigger out of the saddle, a barrel-chested man whose thick bowed legs were encased in bullhide chaps and spike-heeled cowboots.

"Where's the Montana Kid, Betty?"

Standish barked the words with a ferocity that stiffened the muscles in Hollister's belly. I shaved it too thin, ran the despairing thought through the deputy's head. I didn't know her Dad would be waiting for her on the trail.

He jerked his gaze off Standish's rifle and saw the girl staring his direction, white-faced.

"This is the man Jim Peasley sent over from the depot, Dad."

Standish's eyes blazed like hot coals under their drawn-together brows. He spat a gobbet of tobacco juice into the racing water at the bank's edge, and levered a cartridge into the breech of his saddlegun.

"This isn't Montana," he said. "And it isn't Wick McConnick, because I know the sheriff is crowding sixty. Who are you stranger?"

Mel Hollister licked his lips. To identify himself as the twin brother of the man the Montana Kid had bushwhacked would be inviting a bullet.

"Don't blame your daughter for this, Standish," he evaded. "That telegraph operator bashed the wrong man, that's all. The Montana Kid is dead."

Roe Standish's jaw dropped. "Jim Peasley sold us down the river, did he? He took Overmire's money and sent a John Law back with Betty. Climb down, stranger."

Stiffly, Mel Hollister dismounted. Ice-cold water sluiced around his ankles as he led the sorrel over to where Roe Standish stood, rifle poised, on the west bank. Betty followed, dismounting alongside her father.

Noting his daughter's white face and trembling hands, the rancher said in a softer voice, "Don't fret, honey. This wasn't your fault. You'd never laid eyes on the real Montana Kid. You had no way of knowing."

Standish turned back to Hollister. "Shuck off the coat."

Hollister unbuttoned the fleece-lined jumper, and saw Standish's eyes narrow as the morning sunlight flashed off the deputy's badge pinned to his calfhide vest. Then, before Hollister could shuck his arms out of the tight-fitting sleeves, Roe Standish spotted the curved stock of his holster gun. Reaching out expertly with his rifle barrel. Standish hooked the .45 out of leather and flipped it into the racing stream.

"A deputy sheriff," Standish said flatly. "You were hunting the Bitterroot Gang. I have to give you credit for having guts, which is more than I can say for Overmire. He insisted on sending my little girl over to Skytop to spring the Montana Kid, because he knew Betty's being there wouldn't arouse suspicion."

After satisfying himself that his prisoner had no more guns, Standish permitted Hollister to put the jumper back on. Then he dropped his bombshell.

"We're five miles above my hill ranch, deputy. You came into the hills hunting Overmire. Well, you'll see your man. He and two-three of his ramrods came over from the Roost last night to welcome the Montana Kid home."

Roe Standish chuckled with malevolent humor. "Overmire will have a surprise in store for him, I reckon, when we show up with a Johnny Law instead of his pet gunslammer. You know, I bet old Peasley didn't doublecross us intentionally, Betty. I think he bashed the wrong red-head. For his sake, that's the way it'd better be."

Standish ordered Hollister to remount. Then he took a coil of rope from his saddle and flipped a loop over Hollister's shoulders, pinioning his arms to his sides. He dallied the other end of the riata to his saddle horn, and they were ready to ride.

"Lead off, Betty," the outlaw ordered. "Overmire will be sleeping when we get there, but he's due for a rude awakening."

As Betty mounted, Hollister saw the pleading glance she directed toward her father. She said in a strained voice, "Turn him loose, Dad. Don't let Overmire shoot him like a dog. He's worth a dozen Montana Kids. Overmire would never know."

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Roe Standish squirmed. "We got our own skins to think about, Betty. If we turned this man loose he'd lead the law up here. My hands are tied, like they've always been."

Hollister's eyes met Betty's. He said, "Thanks."

The girl's throat choked with a helpless sob as she turned her horse downstream.

THE STANDISH ranch was five miles down Oro Fino Creek, a collection of log shacks and pole corrals clustered at the upper end of a hidden park between high walls black with pine. Overmire's Roost was probably something like this.

The three riders pulled up in front of a rambling, low-roofed log ranch house, where smoke spiralled lazily into the cold morning air from a rock chimney. The frozen snow crust was plentifully tracked with boot marks, where Vance Overmire and his henchmen must have walked over from the stock barn last night.

Roe Standish worked the lariat noose up around Hollister's neck before permitting his prisoner to dismount. At a word from the rancher, Betty gathered the three bridle reins and moved off toward the barn. Standish, leaving his Winchester in its saddle boot, drew a sixgun from his belt and motioned Hollister toward the doorway.

A cold resignation was in Mel Hollister as he pulled the pleated rawhide latch string and stepped into a beam-ceilinged room dominated by a massive fieldstone fireplace in which a heap of pitch-pine logs blazed cheerily.

He had a vague impression of mounted game heads on the walls, coyote pelt rugs underfoot, pole furniture, a big horsehide sofa. The touch of a woman's hand, Betty's hand, was evident in the gingham curtains on the windows and the potted plants on a corner table.

Then Roe Standish was directing him over to the fireplace while he, paying out his rope, went over to a partition door and kicked it wide open.

Standish bellowed into the darkened room beyond, "Vance, Russ, Alamo! Rise and shine. We got company."

A mumble of voices and a creaking of rawhide-sprung bunks and straw mattresses reached Hollister's ears as he backed up to the welcome warmth of the pine logs. He knew he was about to face a judge and jury even as the Montana Kid had done, and that their verdict would be the same as the Kid had drawn.

But in this moment he could think of nothing else than the plea a renegade's girl had made for his life, and his most poignant regret was that he would die without ever knowing where Betty Standish fitted into this Bitterroot Gang puzzle.

A booming voice reached him from the bedroom doorway. "Montana's back, eh? Next time maybe he won't be so damn trigger happy."

Roe Standish stepped back from the doorway as a huge man in levis and red flannel undershirt, in his sock feet, came into the main room, stretching and yawning. It must be Vance Overmire, in person.

Overmire was a tall and rawboned man with the owlhoot stamp all over him, with narrowed yellowish eyes, a coal-black beard, and prominent gopher teeth. Here was the outlaw who, for ten bitter years, had eluded Territorial law, gathered other outlaws into his band, and struck at will from the mountain fastness no posse had ever been able to locate.

Vance Overmire's eyes widened, all trace of sleep vanishing from them as his glance shuttled between Roe Standish and the tall young cowpuncher standing by the hearth.

"One of the Hollister brothers!" Overmire gasped. "Twin to the one Montana plugged. How'd you rope this critter, Roe? When Betty gets back from Skytop with the Kid, he'll think he's seeing a ghost!"

Two other men joined Overmire, tugging gallus straps over their shoulders, buttoning their shirts. They would be Russ and Alamo —the latter being the rider who had attended the Sage City trial and brought the word into the hills that the Montana Kid would be on last night's train.

Roe Standish sauntered over to where Hollister stood, and jerked open his jumper to reveal the tin star on his vest.

"Betty's already back, Vance," Standish said. "The Kid's dead. This is the man Betty brought back, thinking it was Montana."

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FOR a long moment, Vance Overmire and his partners stared in shocked amazement, overpowered by this news. Finally Overmire said, "When Alamo told me Hollister was going along with the sheriff, I worried for fear he might try to get his own revenge on Montana."

Standish shook his head. "Peasley did it, the deputy claims. He bashed the wrong redhead; that's the way I figure it."

The front door opened and Betty, looking pale and haggard, came inside. Her father greeted her with a brusque, "Rustle up breakfast for five, honey. Hollister won't be eating."

When Betty had vanished in the direction of a kitchen in the rear of the ranch house, Vance Overmire came over to the horsehide sofa and sat down facing Hollister. Up to now their prisoner had not spoken a word.

"Roe," Overmire said, "you figure Betty and this star-toter were trailed out from Skytop?"

"Meaning where is McConnick?" Standish said. "I don't know. He must have been sleeping when Hollister got off the train with Montana. Why don't you ask him?"

Overmire's buck teeth glittered in a sinister smile. "I think," he said, "we'll head for the Roost right after we eat. We'll take Hollister with us, and make sure he's planted well away from your ranch here, Roe, in case the sheriff shows up hunting for sign."

Roe Standish said, "I'll lock Hollister up in the smokehouse for safekeeping, then."

Vance Overmire came to his feet, stretching indolently. "A good idea. Alamo, you saddle up and ride to the pass trail, where Betty hit the creek. If you see any signs of McConnick bringing a posse over from Skytop, fire three shots and light out for the Roost on your own. Russ, you go out and saddle up. We'll pull stakes directly after we eat."

Desperation stole over Mel Hollister as he saw Roe Standish haul a gun from leather and motion for him to follow Russ and Alamo out the door. To make a break for it now would be sure death; he was certain of that. But once Overmire had him on the trail to the rustler den, he was finished.

Heading out the door after Overmire's riders, Mel caught sight of Betty Standish working in the kitchen, frying a skillet full of eggs. He thought, that's my last glimpse of her. She's slipped into my life and out of it, and I don't know what she's doing up in these hills.

Overmire's men cut across the snow-covered grounds toward the barn. Roe Standish, gripping Mel's arm, was directing him toward a squat stone smokehouse some distance away, which had no windows, only a smoke hole, covered by a sheet-iron damper, on the roof.

"Kid," the rancher said, "I have no more stomach for this than Betty has. But Overmire's guns rule this spread. I'm as helpless as you are."

"Why?" Hollister demanded, wincing as he felt Standish's gun muzzle prod his spine. "You and Betty aren't Overmire's stripe. What's he holding over you?"

Roe Standish grinned bitterly. "It's a long story, son. I shot a man down in Wyoming. It was self defense, but I couldn't prove it. That was when Betty was a baby. I had to go on the dodge. I came up here into the Bitterroots and started this spread. A couple of years later I sent for my wife and Betty. They loved me enough to go into hiding with me."

They were approaching the smokehouse now. Mel Hollister felt a driving need to find out more about these Standishes.

"I think I get it," he said heavily. "You know where Overmire's hideout is. That's what he's got on you. You live only as long as you keep his secret."

Holding the gun on his prisoner, Standish reached to lift a heavy padlock from the hasp on the smokehouse door. He drew it open, revealing a ten-foot-square rock floor, with quarters of beef and venison and bacon hanging by hooks from the log ceiling.

"Somethnig like that," Standish answered. "You see, I married Overmire's sister. When he tangled with the law and had to hide out, he came here. It broke my wife's heart when Overmire turned into an owlhooter. That's what killed her, three winters back, as much as the pneumonia. Get inside, kid. Try to see it my way. I'm wanted for murder in Wyoming. Vance Overmire could bring the law up here after me if I got out of line. That's how it stands."

A wild impulse went through Mel Hollis-

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ter to jump Roe Standish and grapple for his gun, even if it meant taking a point-blank bullet. But he saw the futility of that when Russ and Alamo came out of the nearby barn, leading horses. Even if he caught Standish by surprise, he wouldn't get ten yards before Overmire's killers cut him down.

HE STEPPED into the smokehouse and heard the slam of the door behind him, the click of the padlock. He was in total darkness, the smoky odors of the unventilated hut stinging his nostrils.

Through the chimney opening he heard a clatter of hoofs as Alamo rode off up the creek, to keep a lookout for a posse approaching from Skytop. Overmire was safe enough. McConnick might conceivably pick up his and Betty's trail, but that would take time and, within an hour, Hollister would be heading toward Overmire's outlaw roost and an unmarked grave in some canyon snowbank.

He took a match from his hatband and struck a light to have a look around. It was enough to tell him that escape from the yard-thick walls and bedrock floor was impossible. The ceiling was of crisscrossed lodgepole pine logs, probably two feet thick; the chimney opening was too narrow for a man to get through.

Hunger pangs prompted him to take out a pocket knife and cut a strip of jerky from one of the hanging deer carcasses. Chewing the hard meat, he lost track of time. The minutes dragged like hours. It was below freezing in this smokehouse, and he had to keep stamping his feet and swinging his arms to drive the numbing spread of pain out of his flesh.

Then he heard the click of a key in the padlock outside the thick slab door, and panic touched him. He know that Overmire was ready to ride, that his only chance lay in trying a break before they could tie him up. It was an almost impossible chance, but a man couldn't stand by meekly and face his finish.

The door opened, but it wasn't Overmire standing there. It was Betty, and she was pressing a loaded sixgun into his hand, the Colt she had forced him to hand over on the trail last night.

"Vance is over at the barn. I've got a horse tied behind the house," Betty gasped out frantically. "As long as you keep out of rifle range, you might make it. Head for the timber."

A wild exultation went through Mel. He thrust the gun under his waistband and pulled Betty Standish to him, feeling the soft swell of her breasts against his chest.

Her arms came around him in a wild abandon, and her warm lips lifted to meet his. Then she pulled free, gasping frenzied words. "No time for this—just promise you won't use that gun on my Dad—and hurry, Mel, hurry—"

He said grimly, "But I can't leave you behind. They'll know you unlocked this smokehouse. Overmire would kill you."

The girl shook her head, pushing him toward the half-open door. "Lock me in here. Dad's in on it, he gave me the key. He says when Overmire and Russ take after you, that'll give us our chance to get away—and it'll be forever, this time."

Hollister edged through the door, his eyes on the barn. He was snapping the padlock in the hasp, to protect Betty Standish against Overmire's wrath, when he saw the two outlaws emerge from the barn, leading saddled horses.

They spotted him breaknig away from the smokehouse. Overmire's dismayed shout wakened wild echoes across the valley. A gun blasted deafeningly from the sounding board of the barn walls, and a bullet grazed the back of his jumper as, crouched low he headed for the ranch house and the horse Betty had said was waiting for him.

He was diving around the near corner of Standish's log shack when he heard the sharp drumroll of hoofs coming from the barn, and knew Overmire and his men were in mounted pursuit. Rounding the rear corner of the house, he saw a line-back dun tied to a pump handle out by a water trough.

Jerking the reins free, and palming his six-gun against the showdown to come, Mel Hollister vaulted into the saddle just as Overmire and Russ came in view, crowding their horses at a dead run past the end of the house.

He triggered a snap-shot at the oncoming pair, and missed. From the tail of his eye he

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saw Roe Standish emerge from the kitchen door, a shotgun in his hands. He saw Standish life the Greener, saw flame spit from both barrels, but the whistling charge of buckshot went wide.

DRIVING in the spurs, Hollister sent his horse toward the nearby timber, knowing he would be safe once he gained that shelter. Standish had had a point-blank target, using a shotgun, and yet he had missed. Standish had deliberately aimed wide, though he had fired for Overmire's benefit, to allay the boss outlaw's suspicions that Standish had some part in their prisoner's getaway.

Hollister hit the edge of the timber at a reaching gallop, snow-heavy pine boughs slashing at him like whips. Overmire and Russ were slamming lead after him, but he was an elusive target to be cut down from horseback.

A game trace opened up before Hollister, and he put his horse down that open path, knowing he had to draw Overmire and his gunman away from the ranch to give Roe Standish and Betty their chance at a getaway.

He could hear Russ and the outlaw boss smashing through the undergrowth behind him, as he put the dun down the trail at top speed. A moment later the horse was out in the open park, heading toward the ice-covered meanderings of Oro Fino Creek.

The dun was momentarily out of control, failing to respond to its rider's efforts to cut back into the timber. Here in the open, Hollister knew he was a prime target for the gunmen overtaking him.

The dun hit the ice of the creek and almost went down before gaining the far bank. Ahead, fifty yards away, was the cover of the timber. He heard the high sharp whine of bullets bracketing him, as he spurred the dun for extra speed. He knew, from the sound of the following shots, that Overmire and Russ had unlimbered saddle carbines.

Reining up at the edge of the timber, Hollister saw Overmire and Russ as their horses were crossing the creek. The ice had been broken by the passage of the dun's hoofs and Russ's big sorrel went down, hurling its rider into a snowbank. As Russ came to his feet, swinging a Winchester toward the escaping deputy, Mel Hollister notched his Colt sights on the gunman and squeezed off his shot.

It was long range for a belt gun, but he saw Russ go down. Overmire was swinging wide now to get out of range of Hollister's .45, and Hollister saw his bullet kick up snow far short of the big outlaw.

Backing his dun behind the underbrush, Hollister got out of sight of Vance Overmire. But he knew Overmire was making for the timber also, careful to keep out of sixgun range, and that from here on it would be a stalking game with the advantage all on Overmire's side, armed as he was with a high-powered deer rifle.

At that moment Hollister's ears caught an alien sound drifting across the mountain wasteland. There were three rifle shots, evenly spaced, muted by distance, coming from somewhere along the Oro Fino.

Alamo's signal, Hollister thought. He's spotted riders coming from the Pass.

Hollister headed back into the open now, putting his dun up-creek, knowing he was drawing Vance Overmire after him. Plunging through the brush, it was probable that Overmire hadn't heard Alamo's danger signal.

Across the sun-glittering expanse of the meadow park, Hollister saw Roe Standish racing for the barn for horses. He saw the tiny blot of the smokehouse where Betty Standish crouched in the dark, hearing the slam and crash of gunfire and not knowing how his bid for escape was going.

Now he was out of the meadow, in the Oro Fino's narrowing canyon, out of sight of the Standish ranch. Rounding a bend of the creek, on familiar ground now, he caught a glimpse of Vance Overmire riding in pursuit. But he kept going up-stream, toward the pass trail.

He was three miles above the ranch, and the dun was beginning to falter from the upgrade climb, when he heard a thundering of hoofs on rock up ahead. He pulled the dun to a skidding halt, just as the outlaw named Alamo came into view directly ahead.

ALAMO'S eyes widened as he recognized the horseman blocking the trail ahead. With a wild shout the outlaw dragged a Colt from leather. He had the gun half

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raised when Mel Hollister's bullet caught him in the temple and dumped him backward off the horse.

Even as Alamo's empty-saddled horse bolted up the ravine wall, leaving its rider sprawled on the ice of the Oro Fino's bank, Mel Hollister caught sight of a close-packed body of riders threading the edge of the creek upstream.

He lifted a glad shout of relief when he recognized old Wick McConnick in the lead, sunlight flashing on a rifle barrel as he led a posse of Skytop riders down the steep trail.

The crash of iron-shod hoofs on gravel warned Mel Hollister of a closer danger from behind. He slid from stirrups, crowding the dun back into the brush. Vance Overmire came pounding around a bend of the ravine, almost on top of him.

Overmire recognized his danger, and knew he could not stop his horse and turn around to make for cover. The big outlaw sprawled out of stirrups and landed in a snowbank, dropping his Winchester in favor of a sixgun.

Facing each other at point-blank range, Overmire and Hollister held their fire for a moment, time enough for the deputy to shout, "Get your arms up, Vance. McConnick will want you alive."

Vance Overmire saw his old enemy from Sage City then, hurtling down the creek beyond Alamo's sprawled body. He had his choice and he chose suicide, swinging his gun toward Hollister. Before he could dog the hammer back, the deputy's bullet caught him in his protruding buck teeth and knocked him backward into a snowdrift.

Wick McConnick piled out of stirrups and threw his arms around Mel. "You got Overmire. I'd know that buck-toothed skunk a mile off."

Skytop men, strangers in miners' garb, were dismounting on all sides. McConnick was babbling, "Blasted fool, getting off that train last night. That man I found handcuffed to the Kid's carcass said you'd headed over the pass with a girl. We followed your sign to the creek and lost it there. And then we heard that rider fire his warning signal, and we took after him."

Mel Hollister swung back aboard his dun. He said, "Wait here, sheriff. I'll fetch back a man who can tell us where Overmire's hideout is, a neighbor of Overmire's who has nothing to do with the Bitterrooters. We can hustle up a bigger posse and clean out the Roost before we head back home."

BETTY STANDISH and her father were deep in the timber below the ranch when they heard a lone rider galloping in pursuit, following their clear trail through the snow.

Roe Standish dragged his carbine from its saddle scabbard. "I hope it's Overmire."

Betty spotted the trailing rider first, and recognized Mel Hollister. She reached out to seize her father's rifle barrel.

"It's Mel. Don't shoot, Dad. I—I love him."

Roe Standish thrust his carbine back into the boot. He said resignedly, "He's a deputy sheriff, and he heard from my own lips about that Wyoming deal. But I'm through running. I won't make any trouble, honey."

Mel Hollister grinned broadly when he caught sight of the Standishes waiting.

"Overmire's dead," he called out. "You've got nothing to worry about from here on out, Roe. Nobody but the three of us know about that Wyoming business that sent you on the dodge. And I wouldn't doublecross my own father-in-law, would I?"

Mel reined up close alongside the girl's horse, and reached out to embrace Betty Standish. He whispered, "Give me time to win your heart, Betty . . . give me a chance. I have a hunch my Rafter H spread isn't going to be the lonesome place I was dreading to go back to, now. Maybe your father would consider coming down to take my brother's place, if he's tired of hiding in this snow country. I think you'll both like it down in the foothill country."

Betty turned her tear-stained face toward her father, and saw the tension ease from his features, the hunted look leave his eyes for the first time since she could remember.

"Yeah," Roe Standish said huskily. "I think the three of us'll like it down in the foothills."

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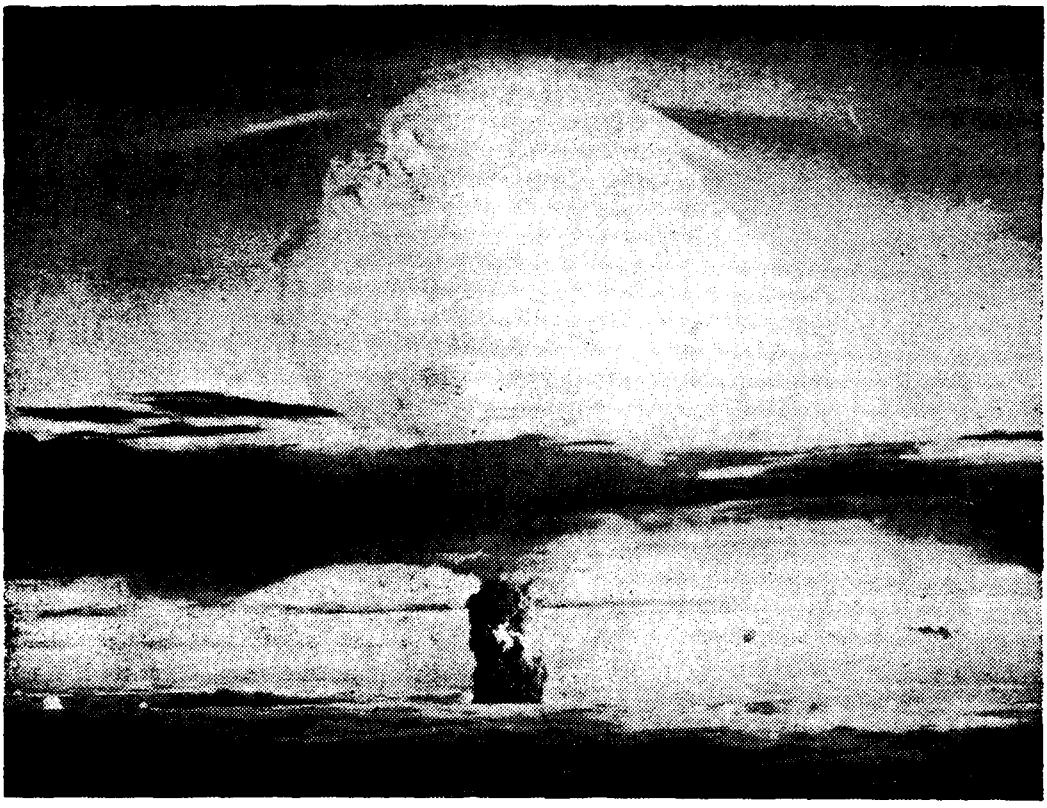

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SINNER MAN

By Talmage Powell

JIM ALDEN FOUGHT his enemies with a gun, the reverend fought with prayer . . . and one or the other would have to change his ways

JIM ALDEN stood at the bar and listened to the brash youth insult him. He sensed the drifting of men from the bar, until only he and the local hellion stood at the oak.

Jim looked straight ahead, as if paying the other man no mind, but he was watching in the back-bar mirror. At the running down of the young tough's words, silence held the saloon a moment. From outside, where evening shadows lay long over the Arizona mining town of Comstock Forge, a man pushed through the batwings.

He was in good humor, and laughing. The silence in the saloon caught and killed the laugh. The newcomer edged over to the group of men who had withdrawn from the bar.

"It's Jim Alden," somebody whispered to him, "the gunfighter. The man who killed Purvis and Johnston."

Jim felt the weight of their eyes on him. He heard the man at the bar insult him with a laugh. You're asking for it, Jim thought, and Purvis or Johnston would have killed you for what you've said already.

"Purvis and Johnston," the local man said. "Shot in the back, most likely!"

Jim felt his temper flare. He turned and looked directly at his tormenter for the first time. Pardee was the name the bartender had used, when venturing a plea to the youth not to start trouble. Pardee was beefy, bearded, bold. And a bluffer, Jim told himself—a drunk, blustering, glory-hungry bluffer, wishing he had the nerve to draw and win himself the reputation that would go to the man who outdrew Jim Alden.

Jim was lean as a willow whip, with old blue eyes and a few flecks of premature gray at his temples. His face might have been cut from stone, as his mind went back to that other fight, the first one.

Unlike Pardee, he hadn't wanted to fight. That other stranger had been drunk, too, and spoiling for a scrap, and Jim Alden had seemed like game meat, because he had that look about him of having ridden long trails alone. It was a look that had first come to his face after the massacre. He'd been fifteen then, and the Indians, raiding his family's isolated homestead, might have gotten him too. But his father had slugged him and hidden him in the cellar.

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"You're a child," Jim said, "and a foolish one to boot."

The look had deepened during the next five years. After burying his folks, Jim had walked the twenty miles to town, because the Indians had run off all the livestock. He got a job as a swamper in a saloon, where the girls had teased and flirted with him because he was so young, and the gamblers had bought him drinks for running errands.

When he was seventeen, he'd joined on for a cattle drive, riding drag, eating dust. At twenty he'd been well on his way to joining that fraternity known as saddle bums. Then came that night in Texas, when a man rotten with drink and spoiling for a fight had given him no choice but to kill or be killed.

When the smoke cleared, Jim Alden had learned that he'd killed the most feared gunman in the territory. After that the trail was

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even longer and lonelier. A man who brought the shadow of death with him found few places that wanted him and few men who wished to call him friend.

GLANCING at the bartender, Jim asked, "What do I owe you?"

The bartender, hovering far down the bar, did not answer.

Jim felt Pardee grab his arm. "I don't like men cutting me off that way!" Pardee said.

Jim looked at the hand on his arm, but he held his temper in check. "Look, boy, why don't you go home? I don't want to hurt you, and I don't think you really want to fight."

"Calling me yellow?" Pardee's voice cracked on the final word.

Somebody laughed. Jim saw it happen then. Pardee was a bully and bluff, but he had liquor courage, and he smarted under the laugh. He had talked himself in deep, and Jim Alden had tried to dismiss him with the words of a man speaking to a boy.

Jim saw Pardee's draw, and it was fast. He heard gunfire. He saw Pardee go down. He stood a moment, then walked out of the saloon. His horse was at the hitchrack. He mounted up. As he rode down Main Street, it struck him that he had not been in Comstock Forge even long enough to locate a rooming house.

Two nights later, a stranger rode into the circle of light cast by Jim's campfire. He was a big, black-bearded man.

"I'm Tait Tomkins," the stranger said. "That was my brother you killed in Comstock Forge. Now I've come to kill you."

Tait Tomkins had a rifle in his hands. While Jim was still on his hunkers, the first slug hit him. It broke two ribs and knocked him flat. The second ripped open the muscle in his shoulder. The third made a bright scarlet furrow in his temple.

Tait Tomkins turned and walked away. The campfire burned to embers. After a time, a coyote came crouching toward the smell of fresh blood.

There was a mist, and lost in it was a woman singing. Jim Couldn't see her, but the faraway sound of her voice made him want to wake up.

Then thoughts began putting themselves together. Shot like an animal . . . shot with no chance to get on my feet . . . shot and left to rot. Tait Tomkins is one man I've got to kill.

He opened his eyes. He was in a covered wagon, feeling weaker than creek water. He groaned as he pulled around and looked over the tailgate. He saw the singing woman. She was washing clothes in the creek, beside which camp had been pitched. She was young and lovely, with light brown hair and arms that flashed in the sun as she crouched on a flat stone and rinsed shirts and petticoats.

She hung up the clothes and came toward the wagon. When she saw Jim, she smiled. "Hello. I believe you're clearing in the head."

"Have I been out of my head long?"

"Over three weeks. Papa and I found you. He fought a coyote away so he could give you decent burial. Then he discovered that your heart was still beating. Papa doctored you—and of course he prayed you through."

Jim stared at her. "He did what?"

"Doctoring alone wouldn't have done it. My name's Elena Britt. Want to tell me yours?"

"Jim Alden."

"I'll bet you're hungry." She turned and went to the campfire, where a black iron pot bubbled. She came back with a plate of beef broth. "Take it slowly," she said. "For three weeks you've had nothing stronger than warm milk, mush, and broth, spooned into you by Papa and me."

"I'll repay you," Jim said.

"Oh, we didn't do it for pay, Jim."

She was silent a moment. Then she said, "Papa says it must have been bad trouble, to get you shot up that way. He says your gun looks like the tool of a gunfighter."

She gazed out the rear of the wagon. "I hope Papa can convert you."

"Convert me!"

"He's the Reverend Buford Britt. If he can convert you, then you'll put the gun away. Without it, you won't be a challenge to other men, and you won't get killed. You mustn't get killed, Jim Alden! A girl can't watch over a man for three whole weeks without some kind of reaction. Are you a single man?"

He stopped eating and frowned. "I am, but. . . ."

She nodded as if that settled something in

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her mind, and slid from the wagon. He shook his head, finished the broth, and lay back to do some thinking. Instead he was lulled to sleep by his lack of strength, the fullness of his stomach, and the warmth of the wagon.

HE WOKE at twilight. The first thing he saw was her face. She was sittnig cross-legged near him in the wagon. She called, "Papa, he's awake now."

The wagon creaked under a big man's weight. The Reverend Mr. Buford Britt was tall, broad-shouldered, square of face, his iron-gray hair neatly cut. He had a pleasant smile, and the twinkling violet eyes that Elena had inherited.

Britt touched the coolness of Jim's forehead. When he withdrew his hand, he bowed his head. Jim started to speak. He caught Elena's glance. She held her finger across her lips and bowed her own head. Jim remained silent until both heads were raised.

"Think I really need that, Reverend?"

"More now than ever, perhaps."

"I owe you a debt. I'll repay it."

"You don't owe me, boy. You needed something beyond anything human to pull you through."

"You really believe that?"

"I'm certain of it," the reverend said.

"Then it must be intended for me to go back to Comstock Forge. As soon as I'm able to ride, that's what I'm going to do."

Elena and her father exchanged a glance. The reverend said, "You'll have to forget it for awhile. You won't be able to ride in the immediate future.

Camp was broken next morning, after a simple devotional service in which Reverend Britt quoted a psalm and asked for aid in his endeavors.

The reverend and his daughter moved in two Conestogas, each drawn by two spans of mules. Jim was told that one wagon held the equipment, the folded yards of canvas of the big tent, the small foot pedal organ that Elena played, the banners announcing Revival, the planks and low saw horses that were seats.

"We're going to San Marco, Jim," Britt said. "There's not a preacher in forty miles of the place, and so much mischief I can hear the devil chuckling clear to here."

The first day of the trip, Jim was able to sit on the seat beside Reverend Britt for spaces of time.

"Call me Buford, Jim."

"I'd be proud to."

"You have folks who should be notified about you?"

"I have no folks."

"Kind of like me. My wife died—" he glanced at the wagon trundling ahead—"when *she* was born."

"That's too bad, but you seem to have done a good job raising Elena."

"I figure she's about normal. Gee there, Ned, gee! These are the kind of mules that give the reputation to all of them. You still figuring to wear that gun again, Jim?"

"Still figuring."

"There's something bigger than any gun, Jim."

"Save it, I'm thankful for the help you've given me, but I . . ."

"There were no strings attached to anything I was privileged to do, Jim."

"Then I'm thankful for that, too—because the gun is big enough for me."

Reverend Britt put his mules to graze on the flats outside of San Marco, and pitched his tent. Jim helped erect a few seats, but he tired quickly. The reverend walked into town to announce his coming, and Jim built up a cookfire for Elena.

WHEN he had fanned the shavings to flame, Jim looked up to find Elena standing close to him. The sinking sun was at her back, etching her hair in a red glow. Jim felt a trembling pass over him, and it was not from the weakness left by his wounds.

The girl looked up at him with a light in her eyes the like of which Jim had never seen before. She was a little pale, and there was a quivering in her lips.

Jim bent his head and touched her lips with his. She put her arms around his neck and stood with her face upturned, the breath soft on her parted lips.

"You feel the same as I do, Jim Alden! You do!"

For a moment, her eyes almost held forgetfulness; then it all came back to him. He

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disengaged her arms. "Is this the action of a preacher's daughter?"

"Must a preacher's daughter be less than human? Jim, will you kiss me again?"

"You're without shame."

Quick tears came to her eyes. She took a step back, biting her lip. Then her face cleared. "You're speaking now out of memory of living by the gun, Jim. Your kiss told me different."

"You're a child," he said, "and a foolish one to boot."

He turned and walked toward the wagon. She followed him, and when he had pulled himself inside, she stood looking at him over the tailgate.

"Go away," he said.

"May I fix you something special for supper?"

"Fix anything you like."

"Why do you fight with yourself, Jim?" A smile lighted her face. "I declare, you love me much more than you think!"

In the act of lying down, Jim sat up with a motion that was quick and savage. "Will you quit pestering me? If you were most girls, I'd make a fool of you—can you understand that? But I'm beholden to you and your father."

"Have you made fools of many girls, Jim?"

"More than you can shake a stick at."

She tilted her face to one side and was silent for a moment. "You're not a braggart—so I don't believe you. If you had made fools of so many girls, you'd be the last to talk about it."

"Listen, and try to get one thing through your head. The yardstick you measure life with is all right, for you. I've been marked with a different brand. I could tell you things I've seen, places I've been that would keep you from sleeping nights. Even if I liked you, we wouldn't mix."

"That's all in the past, Jim."

"The past makes the future."

"The future can be changed. But the medicine won't help unless you open the bottle and take it."

"Who says I want medicine?"

"Jim . . ."

"There's just one thing I want, one thing I'm going to do," he said bluntly. "I'm going back to Comstock Forge and kill a man named Tait Tomkins. I'm going to draw on him and gut shoot him and watch his blood run in the gutter of the street. Now leave me alone. I'm weary of your woman talk."

He lay down with his face toward the plank siding of the wagon. After a few seconds he heard her move slowly away, as if her body were suddenly heavy.

He sat up again, the bones of his face gaunt, shadowed, melancholy. He must leave soon. She didn't deserve hurt, and she couldn't understand that he must satisfy his hunger and seek his own peace his own way. He reached for the gun; the oiled black holster had the feel of satin in his hands.

CROWDS came out to the lantern-lighted tent on the flats. The seats were all filled, and Reverend Britt opened part of the side flaps so people could stand outside.

Jim sat cross-legged in the wagon, oiling the gun by candle light. He heard Elena play the organ, heard the people sing old hymns that brought back the dim memory of his mother's voice singing the same songs long ago.

He listened to Reverend Britt preach. As the man warmed to his subject, he was possessed of an eloquence beyond his everyday speech, though his words remained simple everyday words and his voice rarely rose to a shout. His plea was goodness for its own sake, the giving of consideration to others so that men might live together without strife.

The next day Jim rode his horse a little. Reverend Britt had brought the horse along, tethered behind a wagon. The animal was spirited after its days of freedom from the bit. It sunfished in brief rebellion. The reverend and Elena were watching.

The first jolts felt to Jim as if his ribs had been broken over again. He felt his face blanch, felt drops of sweat pop out on his brow.

He brought the black gelding under control. He let the animal run for half a mile across the flats. The lope back gave the sweat a chance to dry on Jim's face. He dismounted near the campfire. A twinge caught his side.

The reverend said quietly, "Don't be in a hurry to leave us, Jim. It's just as well that you stay awhile. I need your help."

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"All right. I owe you a debt."

"I'm going to town for canvas," Reverend Britt said. "We're going to enlarge the tent."

That afternoon and the next day, Jim and Elena sewed canvas while the reverend cut and peeled new poles and stakes.

Later the reverend asked, "Will you come to the meeting tonight, Jim?"

"Tired," Jim said.

"When you want to come, you'll be more than welcome."

"Thanks."

"No use your just lying in the wagon with nothing to do. I'll fetch you something to read."

"I've already got it, Papa," Elena said, coming from one of the wagons. She handed Jim a small worn book.

He put it under his arm. "Candlelight's hard on the eyes," he muttered.

"You might chance a little of it," the reverend said.

Jim turned toward the wagon. He climbed inside to change shirts for supper.

He heard two horses arrive outside. A voice said loudly, "Reverend Britt?"

Britt answered quietly, "I'm the reverend."

"My name's Kyle McCanless," the voice said. "This is George Broward, my general manager."

"Won't you step down, gentlemen? Supper is almost ready."

"No, we'll make it short and to the point. We're here on business. It happens that I run a . . . a place in San Marco, a small place where the tables are honest. The sheriff is my friend, and I helped put the mayor in office. But there are people who insist on meddling."

McCanless paused to laugh. It was a cold sound. "I'm afraid, Reverend Britt, that your arrival here has given these people false heart. There hasn't been a preacher in these parts for a long time, and you can't imagine what an effect your being here has created. I understand that a deputation of these people is coming here with the request that you permit them to build a church in return for your remaining here."

"I'm humbly grateful that my message has reached the people."

"They'll expect you to speak their message too. They'll want you to spearhead a drive against what they call the corruption of San Marco. I want you to understand how useless this would be, before you take any bread with the butter on the wrong side."

JIM eased back the wagon flap. McCanless was tall and thin, a young, dark, handsome man astride a dun horse. George Broward, was older, perhaps in his forties. He wore two guns, low and tied to his thighs.

The reverend stood quietly looking up at the two mounted men. Elena was drifting closer to her father.

Kyle McCanless looked at the girl a mo-

NO WONDER

By GEORGE H. HOAG

There was a cowboy in Missouri
Who shot a sheepman in a fouri.
To court he was haled,
But he wasn't jailed;
His pards were all on the jouri!

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ment, then shifted his gaze back to Britt's face. "How much do you get in your collection plate, Reverend Britt?"

"Very little, I'm afraid."

"Tomorrow, when you are on the road out of town, I'll show you a real collection—the collection of a hundred nights, garnered in one day."

McCanless started to turn his horse. The reverend stepped forward and touched the reins. "I'm afraid you don't understand, Mr. McCanless. We hadn't planned to leave tomorrow."

McCanless rested his hands on his saddlehorn and rocked forward. "A hundred night's collection not enough? Isn't the hope of a big collection what brought you here? What is it you want?"

"I'd like you to attend service."

George Broward laughed. McCanless gave him a cold glance. "I'm afraid I'll be busy—and I hope you don't draw off too many of my customers for this final service. I'll meet you on the south road tomorrow."

"I won't be there, Mr. McCanless."

"I think you will—unless you'd like to get burned out."

McCanless and Broward turned their horses and rode off. The reverend watched them leave, and finally became aware of Elena standing beside him. "Will you finish supper, Elena?"

"Papa . . . yes, Papa."

Jim let the wagon flap slide closed. He broke his gun and checked the load before he finished putting on his shirt.

Early the next morning, while the reverend was busy with the delegation of townspeople who wanted to build a church, Jim rode off to the river. He dismounted, let his horse graze, and drew his gun. Wrong movement. The elbow was held too close to his side.

Time slid past without his being aware of it, as he regained the feel of the gun. He began firing finally at a sliver of stone protruding in the middle of the river. Draw and fan. Two shots that sounded like one. Draw and fan.

"Nice shooting."

Jim spun about. The reverend was astride a mule, coming out of the timber.

Reverend Britt dismounted and idly looked over the beauty of the river. "They're determined to build a church." He reached and took the gun from Jim's hand. "A well-balanced weapon. Does it shoot true?"

Before Jim could answer, the reverend was fanning the gun. The sliver of stone in the river cracked. The last shot toppled it over. Smiling, the reverend handed the empty gun to Jim. "It's never too late, Jim. It wasn't for me. A man can close one door and open another, or pick either fork of a trail."

"There's no fork until I reach Tait Tomkins."

"The fork will be behind you then. I'll keep praying for you."

"Better include yourself."

"Oh, I'll do that."

"They're going to burn you out."

"They might burn the tent. They can't burn all the people."

"The people will run out and leave you flat."

"Not these people, Jim. They're weak, faltering human beings, but they're working for something bigger than themselves. McCanless is the one who should fear desertion. The officials he's put in office will be the first to deny and denounce when they are faced by the people."

THE reverend turned toward his mule. "Ride back with me, Jim."

"I won't talk about Tait Tomkins."

"All right—though I know this is something you've had to talk yourself into, this going after him. Your natural instincts are against it. I've observed you all through your fever, and since then. I knew you well, Jim."

"It was the manner in which Tomkins acted. I had no more chance than an animal. He deserves punishment for that . . . but we were not going to talk about Tomkins."

"So we weren't. We'll talk of McCanless instead. I don't want to fight him, Jim. I'd rather win him."

"Fat chance."

At the service that night, the reverend showed no visible sign that a threat had ever been made against him. He led the singing in his full baritone voice, his faith lighting his eyes and face.

Jim slipped into the edge of the crowd. He watched Elena at the organ, watched the movements of her hands and trim shoulders, the

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play of lantern glow on her features.

The reverend prepared to deliver his message. Quiet rustled over the tent. In a matter-of-fact voice, the reverend began, "There were three men once whose faith was great enough to lead them out of a furnace of fire."

When the service was over, Jim drifted away with the first of the crowd. From the tailgate of the Conestoga he watched the people stand in small groups before departing. He saw Elena go to the other wagon, its canopy ghostly in the moonlit night. She glanced toward him, but he was standing in the shadows.

The reverend prepared his own bedroll by the dying campfire. Jim had wanted to trade sleeping quarters as soon as his fever was gone, but the reverend had insisted on Jim's sleeping in the wagon until he was strong again.

The reverend didn't sleep for a long time, Jim saw. But the night remained still. McCanless was not coming. The reverend slept at last, and Jim turned in.

Then there was a quick, hard rustle of movement, a muffled cry, and the night was a smothering thing. Jim lay with his eyes open, his heart pounding against his ribs. Was it a dream?

He sat up and crept silently to the rear of the wagon. Easing the flap to one side, he glimpsed the moon, low in the sky. The light was dim and cold and silver, making the flats look like a frozen painting.

A voice said softly, "Better stand easy, Preacher."

A masked man backed into view, holding Elena by the forearm with one hand and a gun against her ribs with the other. From the size of the man, Jim guessed that he could very well be George Broward.

Across the spectral moonlit flats, the reverend walked toward the man and girl. The man said, "We're not going to hurt either of you—yet. Tonight there's just a job to do in there."

Inside the tent, something broke and crashed. There was a tongue of flame, then another. They swelled quickly. A moving silhouette showed, firing hymn books and scattering the flames.

Jim dropped out of the wagon. The man holding the gun on Elena turned. Jim swung his gun hard. The blow laid the man's temple open. His hat flew off and he knocked Elena down as he fell.

Jim reached the tent. He ripped a drop curtain aside. Benches were fired now, and canvas was beginning to burn. The man inside had made certain that his inferno was beyond control, beyond leaving anything for salvage. Now the man was hurrying out of the tent.

SMOKE stung Jim's eyes. "McCanless!" he said.

The man across the tent stopped, turned. A bandanna covered the lower part of his face, but he had answered to his name.

"They did a lot for me," Jim said. "I owe them a debt."

McCanless cast one quick glance behind him. A bullet could drop him before he could cover the distance out of the tent. As he turned back he was drawing, firing.

McCanless's tactic gave him an element of surprise. But his first shot missed. He thumbed the hammer a second time, but his bullet went into the ground as Jim's shot hit him in the chest.

A guy rope burned in two. Showering sparks and smoke cut off McCanless from view. Jim stumbled backward into cold pure air. He gulped it in his lungs. There was movement beside him, and for an instant he faced the raw wrath in Britt's eyes. The anger died quickly, and was replaced by pity.

"Don't you know that if I win the winning must not be drenched in blood, Jim? Have I showed you nothing at all?"

The reverend turned and plunged into the glare of the tent before Jim was aware of his intentions.

He lunged after Britt. Elena cut before him. He grabbed her and pulled her back. She fought silently and savagely a moment.

Then she cried, "Papa!"

The reverend was staggering out of the collapsing tent with his burden. Just as he stumbled clear, flames leaped from the top of the tent and the canvas caved in with a roar.

Britt fell to his knees. Elena dropped beside him, and they laid McCanless on the cool, dew-wet grass. The reverend's brows and hair were singed, and his clothes still looked smoky in the cool air.

"He's still alive," the reverend gasped.

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Jim stood apart from them. He wanted to speak, but he didn't know what to say. He wasn't even sure he could make his voice heard across the chasm he felt between himself and these people.

He turned and walked quietly away. He had fetched his horse and saddled it before Elena and the reverend were through attending McCanless.

Jim drew rein and said, "I'll send back money for the debt I owe. Maybe you can use it in your work. I'm thankful for the help you gave me."

Elena stood with a soft scream forming on her lips. Jim tore his gaze from her face. The black gelding was eager to move, and Jim gave the horse its head.

Elena called his name three times, but the black could move faster than any girl. A half mile out on the flats, Jim could hear her voice no longer.

From San Marco to Comstock Forge was a four-day ride. Jim rode with the certainty that he could outdraw Tait Tomkins and win. His gunfighter's instinct said it was absolutely so.

Yet on the morning of the second day, he admitted to himself that another instinct had won.

After breakfast, he mounted up.

Then he put the oiled black holster and its gun in his saddle bag. With its long, free stride, the gelding moved into the sun—toward San Marco.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Was the Shawnee Trail a cattle trail out of Texas, a route of Indian migration or a homesteaders' route to the west?

2. Is a mule-hipped horse one with unusually high hips or one whose hips slope too much?

3. What is a dog-fall in rodeo steer wrestling or bulldogging?

4. In what way were buffalo an expensive nuisance to the telegraph company in the frontier plains country?

5. Are the Yampa and the Hassayampa forks of the same river or entirely different streams?

6. Wagons were first used on the Santa Fé Trail in about 1824. What was the principal means of freight transportation used before that time?

7. Did the swell-fork saddle for riding broncs come into use before or after 1900?

8. To what did the oldtime trail-driving terms point, swing, flank and drag refer?

9. Travelers entering the once famous mining boomtown of Kellogg used to see this sign: "You are now entering Kellogg, the town discovered by a jackass and still inhabited by its descendants." In what rugged northwestern state?

10. Rodeos are as thick as jackrabbits all over the cow country west in July. Locate at least one of the following: (1) Frontier Days, (2) Ski-Hi Stampede, (3) Pow Wow Rodeo, (4) Pikes' Peak or Bust Rodeo, (5) Days of '47, (6) Yuba-Sutter Rodeo, (7) Santa Fe Trail Rodeo.

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 112. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

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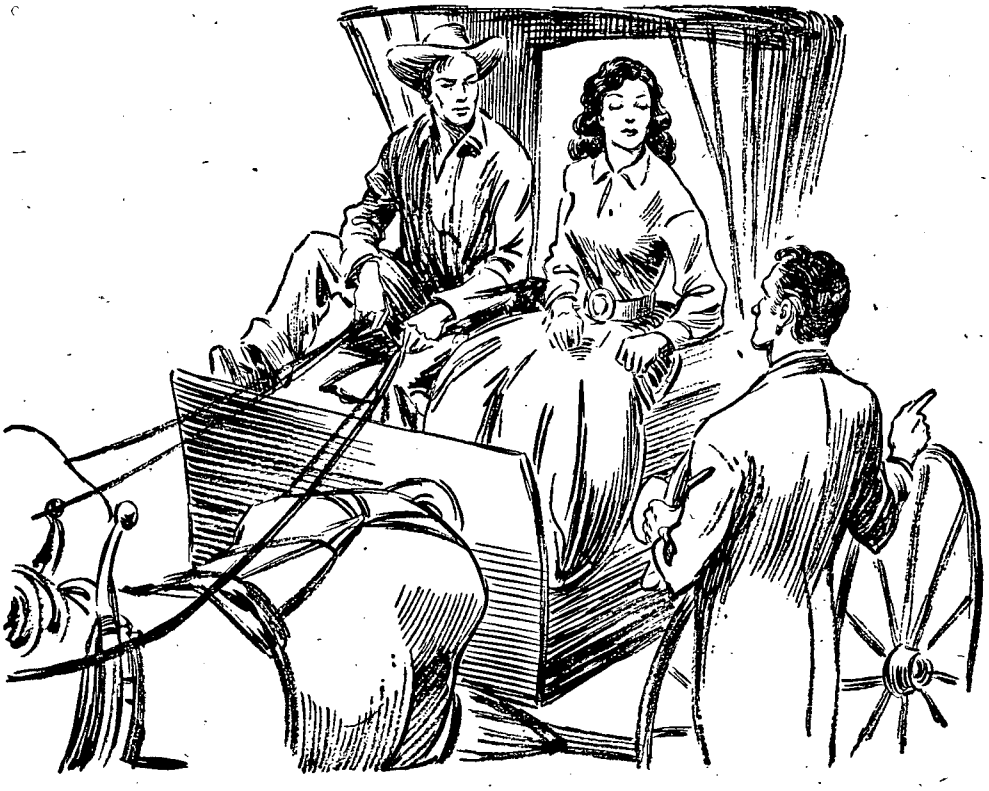

Hazel said, "You choose your friends. Why can't I pick mine?"

Woman for a Hoeman

By Ed La Vanway

SHE was a tall, dark-haired girl with long-lashed eyes and a flawless complexion, and Jim Arnold liked to think she got her good looks from him. She was also mule-stubborn and defiant, and Jim consoled himself with the thought that she had inherited this streak from her mother. He knew she hadn't, though. Hazel was just like him, in many ways, and secretly he was proud of it.

Today, because it was Saturday and the town was crowded with sodbusters as well as cattlemen, she was wearing her newest dark dress with the white collar and cuffs and the wide belt that was cinched tight around her slender middle. Now, chin held high, she whirled away, heading down the boardwalk.

Jim said sternly, "Hazel, wait!"

The girl didn't wait. She continued on

JIM ARNOLD COULDN'T make up his mind which side he was on . . . but a threat of death can be a powerful persuader

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along the sidewalk, making her way through the crowd, and left him standing there in front of the Squaw Hill Trading Company, watching her with perplexed eyes.

Jim Arnold was a well-made man, gray at the temples, smooth of face and, because he had spent the first half of his life in the saddle, still flat across the mid-section. Since he owned half the town, including its only bank, he was now Squaw Hill's leading business man, but he had never been able to bring himself to lay aside his cowman's hat and high-heeled boots.

The only concession he made to town life was wearing a dark business suit, a white shirt, and a black string tie. He still carried a gun, too, a Colt .44, but the one in his shoulder holster now was not so heavy as the one that had ridden his hip in the old days.

Squaw Hill was always full of nesters and ranchers on Saturday, but down this street now were twice as many as had ever been here at one time before. Jim Arnold knew why, too. Today was the day he had promised to let the old sodbuster patriarch, Abe Dodson, know about the bank loan.

The settlers in the Middle Fork bottoms had a plan afoot to build a dam for irrigation purposes, and they were looking to Jim Arnold's bank for the money.

It was a sound deal, any way you considered it, Jim figured, but he was still a cowman at heart. Once the dam was built, the sodbusters would be in the Middle Fork bottoms for all time, and nothing that Bart Rutledge and the other ranchers could do would dislodge them.

If Jim turned Abe Dodson down, the hoemen would starve out—or they could be driven out, eventually. On the other hand, if he agreed to advance the money for the dam, a showdown fight would doubtless break out immediately, spearheaded on the ranchers' side by Bart Rutledge's imported gunman. It would come today, probably, because most of the sodbusters, in defiance of Sheriff Mose Harper's orders, were parading the street with scatterguns under their arms.

It wasn't the prospect of a gun battle that kept Jim Arnold undecided. In his mind the right and wrong of it wasn't wholly clear. The cowmen had grazed the Middle Fork bottoms for years and, while they didn't hold title to the land, it was customary to claim such range and to fight for it. After all, occupancy had come first, in the historic scheme of things, and titles second.

Suddenly then, as he watched his daughter, Jim Arnold made his decision. He would tell old Abe Dodson nothing doing.

HAZEL was headed for the millinery store, where she would wait for Walt Richards to come by for her in a rented buggy. She had been doing that every Saturday for quite a while now, ever since Jim had forbidden young Richards to call for her at the Arnold home.

He should have told young Richards to stay away from Hazel entirely. Still, he couldn't expect Richards to run every time he saw the girl coming, and Hazel was chasing Walt. No doubt about that. She even admitted it.

Well, if she married him she wouldn't get any help from her father. She could move out there into a squatter's shack and live on what the other nester women did, raise her kids the way the others did. Grandchildren or not, they wouldn't be fed, clothed or schooled with Jim Arnold's money—not nester young ones.

Hazel disappeared into the store, and Arnold turned his gaze onto the thronged street, where nester wagons clattered and ranch horses lifted the dust. Abruptly he turned up the boardwalk toward his favorite restaurant, figuring it was time for his midmorning cup of coffee.

No sodbusters frequented this place; the eight or so men scattered among the tables and at the counter were all cowhands or ranch owners. Jim Arnold walked past two men occupying stools at the front end of the counter, and took a seat on the fifth stool back.

Both men turned to look at him, and both spoke. One was Carl Rutledge, a dark-haired and smooth-shaven man in his early twenties, dressed in tailored range garb and low-pulled white hat. Feeling the weight of the Box R spread, which he would inherit some day, he said familiarly, "Good morning, Jim. How are you?"

"All right, considering," Jim said.

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The other man was Reno Shaul. He was at least ten years older than Rutledge, a blond, sharp-faced gunman that Carl's father had imported to throw a scare into the Middle Fork squatters. So far Shaul hadn't made a move, and Arnold figured it was because he hadn't caught any of the hoemen without a buckshot-loaded scattergun.

Shaul said, "Howdy, Arnold," and presently added, "Looks like it's going to be a big day for everybody."

"Everybody's here, all right," Arnold said.

He squinted at the pale-eyed man thoughtfully. Maybe it was him that Shaul was supposed to intimidate! He hadn't looked at it in that light before, but now as certainty touched him he felt the heat of a new anger moving into his face. Reno Shaul was supposed to cow him. He could see it, now, in the sharp-faced man's attitude.

The waitress set a cup of coffee in front of Jim without his having ordered it, and then she returned to the kitchen to bring out the grub young Rutledge and the man with him had called for.

Rutledge's was ham and eggs, Arnold saw, and he kept looking on as the dark-haired man caught his plate by the edge, pulled it it front of his nose, and stared at it with displeasure.

Lifting hot eyes to the girl, Rutledge said, "These damned eggs are cooked hard as rocks. I told you I wanted them over easy."

Bessie was plump and yellow-haired and friendly to everybody, regardless of any particular customer's mood. Smiling pleasantly, she said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Carl. I forgot to tell the cook. Let me get you some more. It won't take more than a minute."

"Well, hurry it up. I can't sit here all day waiting for something to eat. This isn't the only place in town, you know."

Bessie hurried into the kitchen. Jim Arnold slowly stirred his coffee, and young Rutledge glanced at the plate in front of Reno Shaul.

"How's yours?" he asked.

Shaul said, "I'll eat it," and began plying his knife and fork.

Face growing darker, Rutledge waited with mounting impatience. Finally the girl returned with his plate, placed it before him, and stood silent. He stared at it. All at once, with an oath, he shoved his dinner plate back against the bread plate with a crash.

Bessie said, "They still aren't cooked right, Carl?"

"Forget it," Rutledge said. "Let it go."

"You don't like the yolks broken, do you?"

"No, I don't like the yolks broken, do I," Carl mimicked. "Forget it, I said. Get me some coffee."

Bessie said, "I'm sorry, Carl," and turned to serve him the coffee.

Jim Arnold finished drinking his coffee, laid down a coin, and started out.

Reno Shaul said, "Arnold—don't make any mistakes."

At the door, Jim Arnold turned. He said coldly, "If you've got anything on your mind, and you've got the guts, right now's a good time to get it off, Reno."

"I'm keeping my own time, Arnold."

"And I'll make all the mistakes I damned well please," Arnold said, and went out.

MOVING to one side of the door, he stopped to cut a glance down the main thoroughfare, and his chin came up. Brazenly, Hazel and her hoeman suitor were coming right up through town, seated side by side in a red-wheeled buggy.

When he went out into the street, Jim Arnold didn't gesture or say anything, but nevertheless Walt Richards brought the rig to a stop. He was a sandy-haired, gray-eyed man clad in new denim overalls and brush jumper, and he kept his gaze on the girl's father expectantly as Jim Arnold moved up beside the buggy.

Hazel said, "We're going for a ride, father."

"You're not going anywhere but home," Jim said. "You take her right straight home, Walt. You hear?"

"Yes, sir."

Hazel said pleadingly, "Father, why?"

"Because I said so." In an easier tone, Jim added, "I've got worries enough today, without having you two lollygagging up and down this street in plain sight of everybody."

Richards said, "Sure, I know that, Mr. Arnold."

"Father," Hazel said, "you choose your friends. Why can't I pick mine? I'm not a

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flighty young girl any more. I'm grown."

Walt Richards said quickly, "Your dad's right, Hazel. He knows what's best. I knew we shouldn't be seen together today, but—"

"Take her home, Walt."

"Yes, sir. I aim to," Richards said, face grave, and he lifted the lines and slapped the horse on the rump.

The Box R owner, Bart Rutledge, stood on the edge of the sidewalk, looking on, when Jim Arnold turned back out of the street. A burly, heavy-set man with an iron-gray mustache, the elder Rutledge, like his son, was garbed in expensive range clothing, but, unlike Carl, Bart wore no gunbelt and six-shooter.

He said, "Can't do anything with that gal of yours, can you, Jim?"

"I don't seem to be able to."

"I can't do anything with Carl, either. He figures he's too grown up to mind me now."

They turned down the boardwalk together, Rutledge's long-shanked spurs jangling. Heavily he said, "I was hoping Hazel and Carl would make a match, Jim."

"It looked for a while like they intended to."

"Yes," Rutledge said. "I wonder what went wrong? It was Hazel, Jim. Carl's still set on her."

Arnold said, "Well, you know how women are. You never can tell which way they're going to head next."

They had reached the swinging doors of a saloon. Stopping and gesturing, Rutledge said, "Have one with me, Jim."

"No, I believe not, Bart," Arnold said, and shook his head emphatically.

The heavy-set rancher dropped his gaze and stared at the boardwalk for a moment. When he looked up he said worriedly, "Jim, I sure hope you do what you think is right about those Middle Fork nesters."

Jim Arnold said soberly, "I'm giving it a lot of thought," and he stood until the Box R owner had slowly pushed on through the batwings.

Continuing on along the sidewalk, he realized vaguely that on this day he was drawing unwonted attention from those seated along the window benches and loafing on the store porches. They were searching his face intently, as though trying to ascertain what he had just told Bart Rutledge.

Well, Rutledge was far from being in the wrong, Arnold was telling himself; and, aside from bringing in Reno Shaul, the Box R owner had been fairly reasonable all the way around. According to established custom, Bart and the ranchers to the north of him really were entitled to the Middle Fork graze.

Too, Bart was probably just bluffing with Reno Shaul. Jim Arnold couldn't believe that Rutledge would order him killed. The rancher was just trying to scare him.

Reflecting upon it, Jim was glad that Hazel had changed her mind about Carl. That affair in the restaurant a moment ago—showed how Carl would treat a wife, after the newness had worn off. He would be just as rough with the girl he married as he had been with Bessie.

Yes, Jim had to give Hazel credit for that. She had seen things in Carl Rutledge she hadn't liked, and she had had the courage to drop him over everybody's protests, even her mother's.

Maybe, Jim suddenly thought, he had told Walt not to come to the house just because he had been trying to appease old Bart and Carl! Jim hadn't looked at it in that light before. It wouldn't hurt to study that matter a little more closely, and find out just what it was he had against Walt Richards, aside from the fellow's being a nester.

ARNOLD had come to the general store now. On the porch here stood a group of sodbusters, all armed with shotguns. Among them, although not carrying a scattergun, was old Abe Dodson.

Abe had a Barlow knife in one hand and a block of soft pine in the other. He wore faded overalls, a hickory shirt, and a battered hat. Abe was square-jawed, but he was also bearded and grizzled and stooped.

Starting into the store, Jim Arnold stopped. Turning his gaze to the oldster, he said, "I haven't made up my mind yet, Abe, but I'll let you know in plenty of time for you folks to make it back to the bottoms before dark."

The old man lowered his rheumy eyes to shave a slice off the pine block. "You said it looked like a sound proposition, Jim. It

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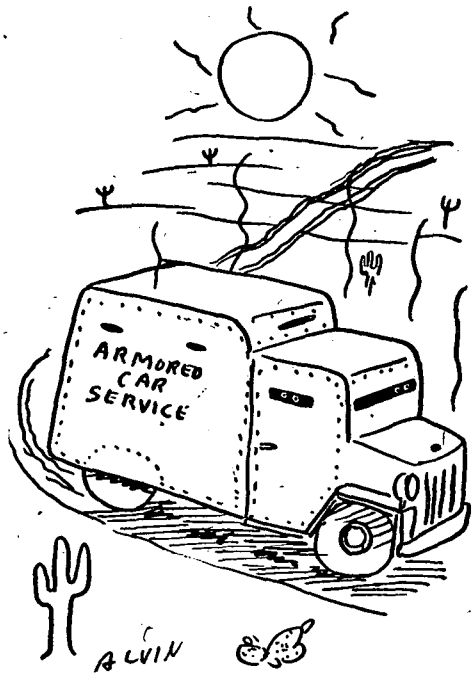
couldn't be that you're afraid of Reno Shaul, could it?"

Jim Arnold said, "Old man, you've got a sharp tongue and a dull mind. There's a lot to it you haven't looked at. You're asking me to lend you money to build a dam the cattlemen don't want, and a lot of that money will be cowmen's money."

"Pshaw! You've got money besides ranch-



"Are you sure you have the right address?"

ers' money. If that were the only kind you had, they would have drawn it all out and put you out of the banking business over this deal. You've got more money of your own than you know what to do with—or they wouldn't be talking about changing the name of this town to Arnold."

"Well," Jim said, "I'll let you know in plenty of time to make it home, Abe." He went on into the store.

The big room was jammed with merchandise and shelving, and crowded with customers and clerks. It smelled of spices, freshly-ground coffee, woolen goods, and tobacco smoke. A man buying chewing tobacco looked around as Jim Arnold approached, and he scowled. He was Sheriff Mose Harper, a red-haired man with a bulldoggish, Irish-looking face.

"Jim," he said angrily, "this town is an armed camp, and you're the cause of it. Why couldn't you have handled that business without bringing all these people in here at one time?"

"I don't think there'll be any trouble, Sheriff."

After accepting his cut of chewing tobacco and paying the clerk, Harper said, "I know there'll be trouble. And if you knew what I know, you wouldn't feel so easy, either."

"Don't keep anything from me, Sheriff."

Still scowling, the lawman contemplated the tobacco lying in his hand, and seemed to be debating whether to take a bite of it. Finally he shoved it into his pocket and glanced furtively around to make sure they were out of earshot of the customers and clerks. Then he fastened his gaze on the banker in a patronizing manner.

"You figure Bart Rutledge is your best friend, don't you?"

"He's always been pretty square with me."

Sheriff Harper nodded, but his expression was ironic. "Well, let me tell you what's afoot. If you decide to back old Abe Dodson and the other sodbusters in that dam-building business, you're going to get killed. Reno Shaul's going to plug you, and down at the livery stable there's a fast horse already saddled and waiting for him, with grub and bedroll and canteen."

"If that's so," Arnold said, "why don't you clap him in jail?"

"It's so, all right, but I have no real proof of it. All I have is what one of the Box R punchers told that gal they call Little Bit up at Belle's place. She sent for me and told me about it. Sure, if I could prove they're planning to kill you, I would run Shaul in. I'm not afraid of him, if that's what you're thinking."

Jim Arnold put his attention on the candy case, seeing several buckets he hadn't yet sampled. "You figure Reno Shaul is chained lightning with a gun?" he asked. "Nobody

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around here has ever seen any of his gun-pulling."

"Well, I'll just bet he is. He's got that killer look, hasn't he?"

Jim Arnold was looking around for a clerk. Catching one's eye, he indicated the candy counter. He said musingly, "Yes, I guess he has." After he had shown the clerk the kind of candy he wanted, he faced the lawman. "Mose, let's see how good your grapevine works. You get word to Little Bit that if Reno Shaul isn't out of this town by sundown tonight, I'll come gunning for him."

Sheriff Harper's eyes jerked wide, and his jaws sagged. "Jim," he asked, "have you gone plumb loco?"

"No," Jim said, "but I haven't always been a banker. I know something about six-shooters myself, and no two-bit gunslinger ever threw a scare into me." He left the store then.

FOLLOWING him, Sheriff Harper cut into the street, gnawing at his cut of tobacco as he made his way through the traffic. He continued on up the far sidewalk.

They would now know that, whether Jim Arnold backed the sodbusters or turned them down, Reno Shaul hadn't influenced the decision. Jim would have to tangle with Shaul anyway, if his threat got around—and Sheriff Harper would see to it that the threat got around.

Arnold was standing across from his bank now, and he told himself he should go over and sign some papers, clear his desk. But he didn't. He turned up the boardwalk, digging his fist into the paper bag and filling his mouth with candy.

The street traffic wasn't so heavy now, but the hitching rails were all lined. Several buckboards were parked in front of the false-fronted buildings, with here and there a nester wagon. Ahead of him, Jim saw one that had apparently just pulled into town. It had also apparently just pulled into the valley.

It was parked lengthwise to the sidewalk, at a vacant spot in the line of buildings. As he came on, Jim studied it.

The bony team had their traces unhooked and their lines tied to a wheel. A hound dog was stretched out in the shade beneath the wagon, and a coop of chickens was wired to the rear endgate. Tethered to the chicken coop was a milk cow. The wagon sheet was rolled up a few inches and fastened to the bows, so that air could circulate, but Arnold saw nothing but household goods inside.

Walking even with the team, he stood looking at the ribby nags, wondering how far they had come. All the while Jim was transferring the candy from the bag to his mouth.

A glance had shown him that the springseat was empty; but now, when he raised his eyes to it, he became aware of someone standing behind the springseat, staring over it at the sack of candy. It was a nester kid of about ten, thin-cheeked and big-eyed, and his gaze followed Jim's hand when it lifted from the bag. The kid licked his lips.

At this moment he saw Jim Arnold looking at him, and he shrank back into the wagon.

Jim said, "Say, boy, where's your old man?"

This brought the kid into sight again, and he ducked under the seat to stand in front of it. Turning his eyes toward the store behind Jim, he said, "He went in yonder."

"What for?"

"To get a little dab of flour and some grease."

"How's he going to get it? He's broke, isn't he?"

"He's going to make arrangements for a little credit if he can. If he can't, he's aiming to trade a couple of our chickens."

"You and him all alone?"

"We are right now. But when he runs onto some woman anywhere near as good as Ma was, he aims to get married again."

Jim Arnold nodded. Lifting the sack, he said, "Want some candy?"

The kid shook his head. He said, "No, I don't believe I'd care for any."

Arnold peered into the bag, drew a deep breath, and then rubbed his stomach. "I bought too much, but I guess nobody would want it after I've had my paw on it. Hate to throw it away, though."

"Your hands don't look dirty to me, mister. No, I wouldn't waste it. If you're aiming to throw it away, let me have it. I'll put it back here, and maybe after a while I'll take a hankering for some of it."

Jim Arnold handed up the sack. Then, be-

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cause he couldn't endure the expression on the youngster's face, he looked away.

In Jim Arnold's mind now was the affair in the restaurant, the finicky and savage way Carl Rutledge had acted about the eggs. This kid probably hadn't tasted ham and eggs in years, if ever, both at the same time. A dam on Middle Fork would fix it so this youngster, and many others like him, could eat regularly.

The cowmen had reached the point where they were no longer grateful for what the land was giving them. It was time for a change. Sure, that was the right thing. It was time for Jim Arnold to help the hoemen.

Looking up at the kid, he said, "If your old man settles on the Middle Fork and needs help getting started, tell him to come in and see me. I'm Jim Arnold, and that's my bank over there." He went on up the sidewalk then, moving at a faster gait.

HE FOUND Abe Dodson and a small knot of sodbusters in front of the Squaw Hill Trading Company. As he walked up, all turned their gazes on him searchingly.

Hardly breaking his stride, he said, "Well, get started on your dam, Abe. I'll finance you fellers."

Abe Dodson said nothing, but one of the others jerked off his hat, threw it down, jumped on it, and let out a yell. As Jim Arnold walked on, the shout was taken up here and there, until it had run the length of the street. Only then did he realize how much his decision must have meant to the sodbusters.

Jim heard a man say, "Arnold! Hey, Arnold!" It was Reno Shaul, coming out from a saddle shop across the street.

Two doors up from the harness store was a saloon. Under its awning stood Bart Rutledge and Carl, looking on, ostensibly, as impersonally interested as all the others. But Arnold knew that Bart was sending the gunman after him.

Jim said, "Are you yelling at me, Shaul?" He pulled his coat back to expose the butt of his sixgun.

"You recognized your name, didn't you? You know damned well I was yelling at you!"

High-heeled boots kicking up the dust, the sharp-faced blond man came on, fingers curling near his gunbutt. Halfway across the street, Arnold stopped, and so did Shaul, for they were now within easy range.

Behind him, Jim heard old Abe Dodson say, "You don't have to do that, Mr. Arnold. Me and my neighbors'll ride him out of here on a rail if you say so."

"Get out of the line of fire, old man, and shut up," Arnold said, and he didn't look around.

Harshly Reno Shaul said, "I hear you've given me till sundown to clear out."

"You hear fast. I said that not ten minutes ago."

"You're a big frog in a little puddle," Shaul said, "but you aren't big enough for me." He went for his six-shooter then.

Jim Arnold hadn't hoped to come off unscathed in matching draws with this professional. As he jerked his Colt from the shoulder holster, his only desire was to empty it into Reno Shaul's chest before he himself was knocked down. He felt the gun buck in his fist, heard it roar, and then was staring through fogging smoke, both from his gun and from Reno Shaul's.

It amazed him when Shaul staggered, dropped his weapon, clasped his middle, and tried to lower himself to the ground. In the next second Reno Shaul collapsed, pitching into the dust. Arnold knew he had won.

In the crowd that quickly gathered, old Abe Dodson reached Jim Arnold first. "You're sure fast and you're sure lucky, Jim. He never touched you, did he?"

"No," Arnold said, "he missed me." His gaze turned briefly to the window where Shaul's slugs had sharded the glass.

Sheriff Harper pushed through the gathering, glanced wild-eyed at Arnold, and then lowered himself clumsily beside Shaul, feeling for a pulse beat.

Arnold himself turned toward Bart Rutledge and Carl, who had also joined the crowd. "You'll have to try again, Bart—bring in another gunman."

Looking down at Shaul for a moment, the rancher said, "He was no gunman. He just thought he was."

"Hell, Bart," Arnold said wryly, "give me

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credit for what I just did."

"I do. You and your sodbusters can have the Middle Fork bottoms, and you won't run into any more opposition from us."

Jim Arnold studied him. "If that's how it is," he said finally, putting his gun away, "I guess it's all settled." He began pushing through the crowd.

Several women had joined the fringes of the gathering, and he saw that one of these was his daughter. Beside her stood Walt Richards.

"Walt," Jim said sternly, "I told you to take her home."

"I did. I sure did, Mr. Arnold. And I didn't bring her back. She came of her own accord. I was just standing here, and looked around—"

"And there she was," Jim interrupted sardonically.

"Yes, here I am," Hazel said indignantly. "Father, what do you know about picking a husband? You've never picked one, have you?"

"No, I guess not," Arnold said, and put his hand on Walt's shoulder. "But I know you have, and I reckon I'm glad."

BILLY WILSON'S MAIL

DUE TRIBUTE has been paid "Snowshoe" Thompson for his efforts as a one-man mail service over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, but Billy Wilson's mail delivery has largely been overlooked.

Billy Wilson had been a "stager" in Nevada and California for years before the blizzards began to block roads, trains, and all other conveyances during the winter of 1872. Billy was then hauling mail between Carson City and Aurora, along trails which would have made weaker men grow pale even in calm weather. And when his drivers began turning back because of mounting drifts, Billy realized substitute carriers had to be arranged for if he were to maintain his government mail contract.

"What's more natural than using the people who walked these dangerous trails since history dawned?" Billy asked himself. And knowing the Piutes after years of association with them, Billy began hiring the strongest and most reliable bucks he could find. There were 10,000 residents at Aurora now, and that contract was worth fighting for.

The Indians were organized into teams, some carrying mail sacks on their backs and the others going along to break trail. With the wisdom of the ages, the Indians avoided the white man's trails which were graded along the path of least resistance and where the snow drifted the deepest. The Piutes forced their way into Aurora along the precipitous cliffs, where wind kept the snow clear and the ground froze solidly each night.

Day after day the Indian mail plodded along, never missing a delivery during the entire terrible winter. Regular schedules were maintained throughout with these mail carriers. Despite the fact that most of the West was isolated during the winter, Billy Wilson's Indian mail service never failed to make its appointed rounds.

——Bob and Jan Young

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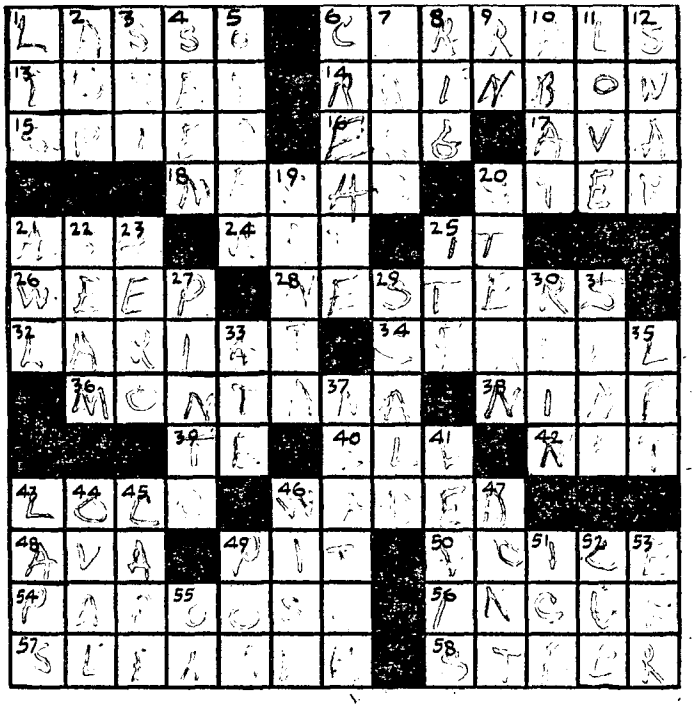
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Lariat
6 Cattle enclosures
13 Inquired
14 Colored arc in the sky
15 Watched secretly
16 Unit of work
17 Miss Gabor
18 Western flat-topped hills
20 Stair
21 Cigar residue
24 Rodent
25 The thing
26 To sob
28 Western squatters
32 Cowboy's rope
34 Breakfast food
36 Western state
38 Six plus three
39 Tellurium (abbr.)
40 Building wing
42 Woven snare
43 Crazy, as cattle
46 Walked in water
48 Actress Gardner
49 Deep hole
50 Human sound
54 Indian baby
56 To become liable to
57 Slim
58 Beef animal

DOWN

1 — Vegas, Nevada
2 Poisonous snake
3 To glide on snow
4 To appear to be
5 More peculiar
6 To make
7 Rowing implements
8 Horse and buggy
9 Royal Navy (abbr.)
10 To aid
11 Ardent affection
12 To exchange (colloq.)
19 — Claus
20 Strict
21 Shoemaker's tool
22 Line of joining
23 He captures the villain
25 Native of (suffix)
27 Piebald horse
29 To burn with steam
30 To check, as horses
31 Mentally sound
33 Had lunch
35 To allow
37 More tidy
41 Blue denim trousers
43 Licks up
44 Egg-shaped
45 Sleeveless garment
46 Having wisdom
47 Do not (contr.)
49 Seed container
51 Frozen water
52 Hint
53 To be mistaken
55 Upon

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

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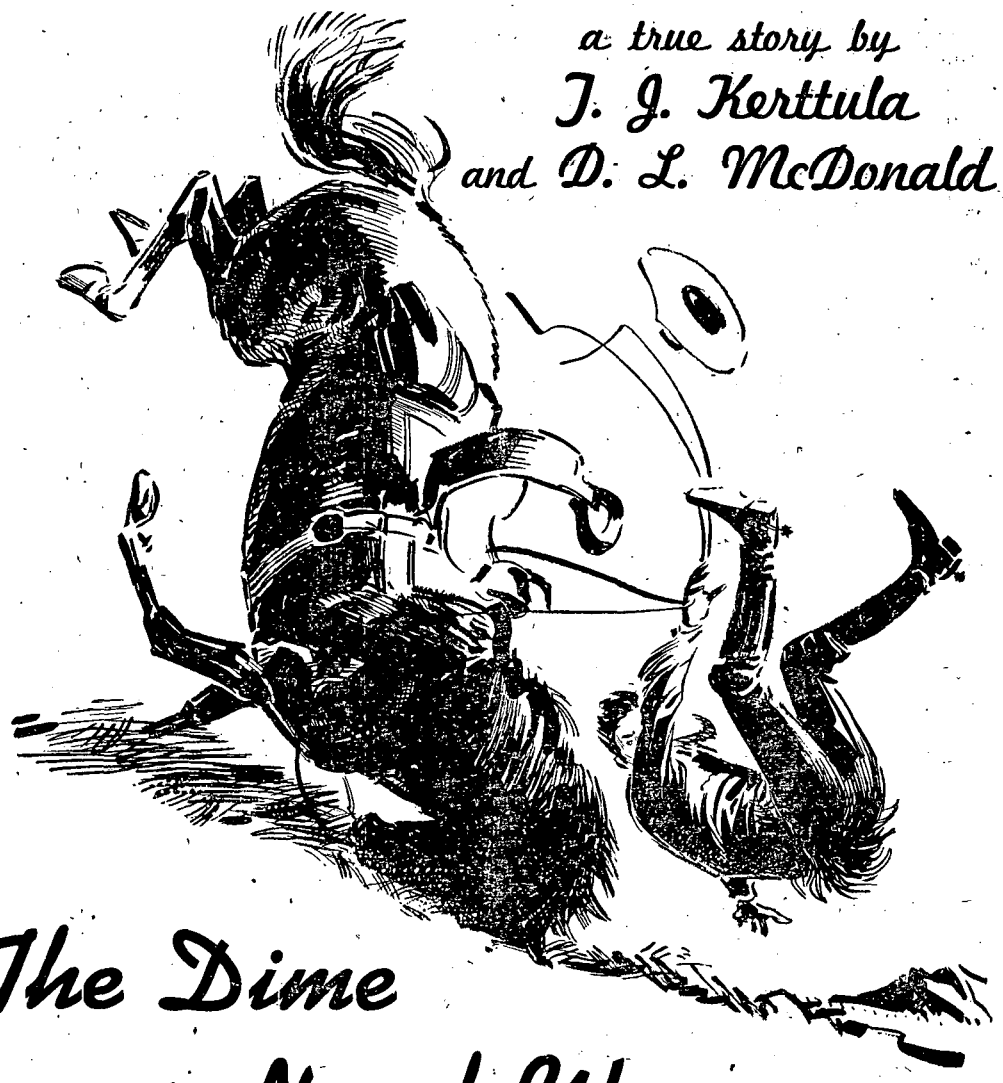
a true story by
J. J. Kerttula
and D. L. McDonald



The Dime Novel Way

THOUGH the Old West saw a lot of fine shooting, the fact remains that, except at point-blank range, the pocket gun was far from the accurate weapon fiction has made it seem. In most old-time gunfights the ratio between bodies and bullets never did approach even two-for-one—and not in favor of the bodies, either.

Usually it was only in dime novels that, when a hero's last bullet sped on its way, "two redskins bit the dust." But on at least one occasion, in the shadow of the Judith Mountains on a still summer evening of 1868, just such a thing did happen.

Montana's private Overland Mail, the Pony Express, Jr., had by that time convinced even its most ardent backers that it would never pay its way or even succeed in getting Montanans' mail to them dependably. So station Manager Al Bradbury was commissioned to travel westward from St. Paul to Helena, "rolling up the line" as he went.

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Late in August, 1868, the Bradbury party, which consisted of Al himself, a guide named Harry McDonald, and three other members, had almost reached Mussellshell City. The country was quiet and empty and, as they approached the Judith Mountains, the men relaxed their vigilance and enjoyed the trip, sure they were safely through the Sioux territory.

Suddenly one of the riders whirled his horse and pointed. "Look," he shouted. "Injuns!"

One backward glance, and the men set spur to their mounts and sprinted for the nearest knoll, the only shelter momentarily within sight. Out of the seemingly empty prairie erupted a painted and bonneted warparty of about forty warriors, and muskets and rifles began to pop as they rode in a wide line abreast toward the Americans.

The hill where the Bradbury party had taken refuge offered no shelter beyond the advantage of the commanding heights, but the lay of the land was such that it would be difficult for the Sioux to trap them within a circle that could be slowly closed.

To get behind the white men, the Indians would have to go past within good rifle range, or else circle beyond the next hill. This would allow Bradbury's party time to ride for the shelter of the river breaks below.

"It isn't the best location for fighting it out at eight-to-one odds," Bradbury admitted ruefully as he dismounted and handed the reins to Harry McDonald, "but it could be worse. They could have caught us flat-footed out there on the plain."

Harry McDonald led the horses to comparative safety beyond the brow of the hill, and the other four took up positions along the top, two in front and one on each side. Thus fire could be shifted to meet any flanking movement to get at the horses. The Indians would have to make almost a straight frontal attack if they intended to overwhelm the white men.

ON THE warparty came, still abreast, riding low over the necks of their ponies and stripped for battle. With the odds as great as they were and no possibility of reinforcements, the Sioux were jubilant and confident.

"Wait until they're about halfway up the hill," Al Bradbury ordered, "and then shoot low and get their horses. Don't waste any cartridges on Injuns! If we can leave them afoot, we may be able to make a getaway. Take your time and make every shot count!"

At the foot of the hill the Indian line split and began to swing around the knoll on both sides.

"Two men to a side!" Bradbury shouted. "Don't let 'em get at our horses, or we're done for."

The men shifted, and waited for the attackers to get within effective range.

"Now!" Bradbury shouted, and the four began to pour lead into both lines.

Ponies plunged and went down screaming, to catapult their riders under the hoofs of the oncoming Sioux. Shooting from beneath the necks of their running horses, the Indians had little chance of hitting the kneeling riflemen. Their bullets went high and the arrows fell short.

Finally the lines recoiled against themselves, paused long enough to pick up the dismounted warriors, and retreated to a coulee facing the front of the hill so they could regroup out of sight.

The first attack had been repulsed, but McDonald had been so busy with the "spooked" horses that he had not fired a shot. He handed his rifle and cartridge belt to Bradbury, and tucked his sixgun under his own belt. Holding the horses was going to be a full time job, and there would be no fighting for him until the last moment. Then, if the others had been overrun and the Sioux were on top of him, he would have no time to reload anyhow, so the loads in his pocket gun would be enough.

After a short respite, the warriors came pouring out of the draw and tried another frontal charge. Again Bradbury held his men to the methodical slaughtering of the ponies. A little more than halfway up the hill the charge broke and, husbanding his ammunition, Bradbury stopped the shooting as soon as the warriors turned back. None of the Indians had been hit, but nearly a dozen more of them were now afoot.

As the afternoon wore on, the Sioux tried by every possible ruse to get within tomahawk

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range of the hill's defenders. Gradually the horses grew calmer, and McDonald loosened the girths and began to rub the animals down. When night came on they might have to ride long and hard.

As the sun dropped lower the Indians became more daring. The white men's ammunition was almost exhausted, and at least a third of the warriors still had mounts. When darkness fell they could probably easily overide the position or creep up the hill on foot.

"We've got two bullets apiece and Mac has his sixgun," Al Bradbury summed up the situation. "I figure another charge is about due. Let them get real close and then make damn sure you git a cayuse with each shot. That ought to slow the charge and get them to milling. Then we'll run for the horses and ride for it. Mac, you keep your shots for the last and cover us as we mount."

As the charge thundered up the hill, McDonald began his preparations for the retreat. He tightened the cinches and, as each man ran back, he handed him the reins and got him started on his way. When the others were all mounted and loping down the hill, he hurriedly cinched up his own horse and started to swing into the saddle.

Just then a lone warrior making a bravo ride plunged over the brow of the hill, yelling and waving his arm in a signal for the others to circle beyond the white men. From behind his plunging mount, McDonald shot the warrior's pony and galloped after his comrades. However, the delay had been long enough to allow the rest of the warriors to skirt the hill and get between McDonald and the rest of the party.

GRADUALLY they forced him farther and farther to the left toward the brush along the river bank. In spite of whip and spur, they seemed to be gaining on him. Turning in the saddle, McDonald fired again and again at the leading brave in an attempt to bring down his mount. Now there was only one bullet left. He'd better keep that one for himself. Shoving the gun back under his belt, he settled down to riding.

For perhaps half an hour he held his own in the race, and he began to allow himself to hope. If he could make the brush along the river, and keep ducking until full dark, he might have a chance. Meanwhile his unarmed companions had turned and were attempting to decoy some of the Sioux off his trail.

He made it to the brush, but again the Indians were closing the gap. Heading downriver, he started dodging among the willows and cottonwoods in an effort to slow and confuse the pursuit. A half mile of this and it seemed that the Sioux were slipping back. The sun was setting; it would soon be dark. If he could keep dodging he might be able to slip away.

Suddenly his horse stumbled, went down on its knees, and did a half somersault. Caught unawares, McDonald sailed in an arc over the animal's head. Relieved of his weight, it regained its feet and galloped on.

Half stunned, McDonald realized he must seek cover at once before the Sioux arrived. He could hear the leaders crashing through the brush on his trail, following him by the sound of his horse. He rolled into a thicket of down timber and dropped between the river bank and the trunk of a fallen cottonwood. For the moment he was safe.

As soon as he was sure the warriors had all passed, he forded the river and started back upstream on the opposite side. Then from far down creek he heard the yells which he knew meant that they had glimpsed his riderless horse. He broke into a run. Now they would come back, beating the brush for him as they came.

The sound of their return was rapidly coming closer, when at a bend of the stream he saw a hole carved into the soft bluff by flood waters. The Indians were so close now that he had no choice. Diving into the hole, he crept along, searching for a hiding place.

The cave was shaped roughly like the letter Y, and was almost large enough for a man to walk erect. He had entered it through one prong of the Y, and the other prong led out to the other side of the point, some distance away. Knowing that his escape would probably already be cut off in that direction, for he could hear the Indians shouting at the mouth of the cave, he retreated into the foot part of the Y and sat down with his back to the wall. This was as far as he could go.

He had only minutes to wait before he

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heard warriors moving along both branches of the cave. Soon it would be time to use that last bullet. The question was, should he use it on himself, or on the first brave to show up? He'd seen what a Sioux warparty could do to their captives, but on the other hand he wasn't a captive yet. Life still tasted pretty sweet.

The way he was situated, they couldn't smoke him out nor flood him out, and he had confidence enough in Al Bradbury to figure he'd be back with reinforcements before the Sioux could starve him into capitulating. The important thing was to last out the next few hours.

If the Indians were to get him, they'd have to come in one at a time to do it. A man couldn't give up when he had a chance like that! When his companions came looking for him at full dark, they weren't going to find him dead by his own hand.

HE CROUCHED, waiting calmly until he could see his pursuers in the dim light where the two tunnels joined his branch. There were two of them. He raised his gun and waited. They turned to investigate his hiding place, and for a moment they were standing in line, one behind the other. McDonald took careful aim and fired at the leading brave. The range was pointblank.

The brilliant streak of flame, and the roar of the gunshot confined in the close space, momentarily dazed him. When he could see and hear again he glimpsed both braves in a heap, one on top of the other. Both were dead.

Outside there was a sudden stunned silence, and then the Indians began to call to those in the cave. They called again and again, but none seemed disposed to come in to investigate. It had grown dark and, like most other Indians, the Sioux were disposed to do both their hunting and their fighting by daylight. Gradually their voices died away.

Hour after hour McDonald squatted in the dark at the end of the tunnel, rigid to catch the first sound that would indicate they were trying to sneak in on him. Finally, an hour after midnight, he concluded that the warparty had withdrawn to wait for daylight. He began to work his way out of the cave.

At its entrance he paused for a long time, waiting and listening. Hearing nothing but the natural sounds of the night, he concluded that the Sioux had gone into camp to wait for morning before they settled down to the serious job of prodding him into the open. On his belly, an inch at a time, he worked his way into the brush and began the slow cautious journey upstream to find his companions.

The desperate gamble against the longest kind of odds had paid off for this spunky little guide. Instead of lying dead with a self-inflicted bullet hole in his head, Harry McDonald would live to ride out the rest of the journey with the Bradbury party.

Bang! Two redskins bit the dust.

It could be termed "the dime novel way."

Coming in the next issue

A Roundup of Movie News and Views by BOB CUMMINGS

●

Featuring a Review of Universal's

RANCH FLICKER TALK

THE MAN FROM BITTER RIDGE

Starring

LEX BARKER and MARA CORDAY

plus

A word and picture personality sketch of

MICHAEL RENNIE

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The JOYS of

By S. OMAR

I went to see a schoolmarm
Just to ask her what she thought
About my education—
If I oughtn't or I ought
To come to school awhile
And try to polish up my brain,
Or did she think such efforts
On my part would be in vain.

She sort of looked me over
With those pretty eyes of hers.
It made me feel as if my fur
Were full of cockleburs,
For she was not a heifer who
Had stood out in the weather.
Her cheeks were pink and all her parts
Were neatly put together.

Her voice made pretty music
And I couldn't help but stare
At how the sunlight danced around
Upon her golden hair.
When she had studied me until
She had my earmarks classified,
She opened up her ruby lips
And soberly replied—

"You're pretty big to go to school.
What would you like to learn?"
I told her I would like to know
What makes a hot iron burn,
And where the moonlight spends the day,
How long's a two-foot stick,
And any other special facts
About arithmetic.

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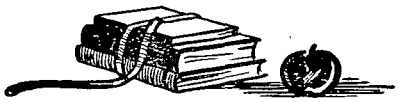
EDUCATION

BARKER

She asked me what I knew about
The hist'ry of the earth.
I told her that I understood
It started at Ft. Worth,
Where Eve was peddling apples to
Some trail herd buckaroos,
Till Mr. Snake told Adam that
His wife was selling booze.

This started up an argument
That's still an even toss
Between the well-known sexes as
To which one is the boss.
She claimed she'd heard it different,
Then asked me what I knowed
On subjects such as grammar
And the dithyrambic ode.



In fact it didn't take her long
To find me pretty dumb.
I told her I'd be working days,
But evenings I could come
And let her try to teach me all
The things I ought to learn,
While maybe I could teach her
One or two things in return.

That's how we closed the bargain,
And I'm mighty proud to state
We've learned more education
Than a college graduate.
She's taught me books, I've taught her how
To savvy cows and weather,
And Love—well, that's a subject we've
Been studying together!

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Milt ducked his head gratefully under the cool gushing water

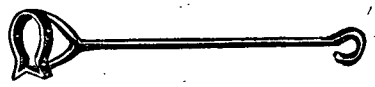
To Brand a Maverick

By Adam Chase

SHERIFF MILT STOKER got the palms of his hands down flat on the floor and pushed. There was still no strength in his arms. His elbows wobbled like the knees of a new-born calf. He thought, it must be almost time for the stage from Tooker. He had to get down and meet the stage.

He dragged his knees up under him and, using them and his hands, was able to lift himself up from the floor. The right side of his face was numb and must be swollen.

He was aware of the shambles in his office, without taking stock of any specific damage. He staggered out the back way into the sunshine, making for the water pump behind McGraw's boarding house.



BEN STOKER HAD been killed by a crooked lawman . . . and young Danny Stoker wasn't going to let any sheriff soft-talk him

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Someone waved from down at the corner. Milt Stoker waved back automatically without seeing who it was. Then he was working the rusty pump handle and ducking his head gratefully under the cool gushing water.

"Is that you, Milt?"

He recognized Eileen McGraw's voice and mumbled an answer.

"I can make some breakfast for you if you want—buckwheat cakes and bacon."

"I'm obliged," Milt said, "but I have to go down and meet the stage. It's pretty short run from Tooker down to here."

Eileen McGraw was alongside of him now. "Milt, what happened to you?"

"It looks much worse than it really is," he said.

"You're coming right inside with me, Milt Stoker, and get yourself repaired. Come on, now."

He was too weary to argue. The stage would come by here anyway, just before it stopped. Eileen McGraw looked trim and lovely in a calico dress as she led him into the boarding house. The sunlight danced in her red hair, cresting it with gold.

Then Milt was sitting in the parlor and waiting while Eileen went in search of some alcohol and clean rags. He could hear Ma McGraw's breakfast guests making a social affair of breakfast in the dining room.

"Here we are," said Eileen.

The alcohol stung his face like needles. Eileen hovered over him and concentrated on what she was doing. "How did it happen?" she asked.

Milt sighed. "Ben's boys," he said. "Yesterday one of them was cutting up in Dufree's saloon, so I ran him into jail for the night and gave them all a lecture about how they couldn't cut up here in Big Bend like they did up north of Tooker. They got me as I was letting him out of the jailhouse this morning."

"Milt, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to meet Ben's son down at the stage," Milt said.

"No, I mean about Ben's gang. Milt, they'll kill you. They'll *kill* you."

"If they break the law, I'll jail them. If they want to use fists, I'll use fists. If they draw, I'll use my gun. What else can I do?"

"How could two brothers like you and Ben have been so different?"

Shrugging, Milt said, "He was always wild. I was always kind of quiet."

"What's his son Danny like?"

"I wouldn't know. I only saw the boy once, five years ago. He'd be fifteen now."

"Please be careful, Milt."

He wanted to ask her how a sheriff could do what he had to and still be careful. Instead he said, "I don't aim to get killed."

JUST then the stage from Tooker came thundering by, shaking the crockery on the wall shelves. Milt pushed aside the curtain and glanced out the window, watching as a few youngsters went trotting after it down the dusty street toward the landing.

He got up and said, "Thank you, Eileen. Does it look real bad?"

"How does it feel?"

"I mean, I wouldn't want the kid to see me all cut up like this the very first time. He's been through plenty."

"It looks like you've been in a fight, sure enough. Be careful, Milt. I'm asking you."

Milt smiled and said, "Thanks for the surgery." Then he put on his jacket and walked outside into the street.

A few moments later he was saying, "You're Danny Stoker, aren't you?"

"That's my name," the boy said. "So what?"

"I'm your Uncle Milt, Danny. You're coming home with me, son."

He was a thin boy, small for fifteen years. His hair was long and dark and the eyes too were dark, and full of hate. He was carrying a small clothing bag over his shoulder.

"Pa's dead," he said. "The sheriff back home sneaked up behind him and shot him."

"That's not how I heard that it happened," Milt said, and realized his mistake too late.

"You're a sheriff too, aren't you?"

"That's right, son."

"Do I have to go and live with you?"

"Your father wanted it like that."

Danny searched in a pocket of his levis and came up with a crumpled sheet of paper. "Pa gave me this for you before he died."

Milt took the offered paper quickly and

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opened it. It was the only message he'd received from his brother in the five years since their last meeting, and now Ben was dead. He read:

> I'll be dead when you read this, Milt. They can't fool me, kid. A man knows when he's going. It doesn't do much good to say I should have known it would end like this, if not here, then someplace else. Funny, how we went off in different directions, isn't it? My kid brother a sheriff. The boys used to laugh all the time.
>
> I got two things for you, Milt. My boy Danny will be carrying this note down to Big Bend with him. He's wild, but a good boy. I'll be much obliged if you rear him as if he was your own boy. The other thing is this. Clint Carmody and the rest of my gang is drifting down south in your direction. Don't buck them, kid, or they'll kill you.
>
> Please take good care of Danny. His ma's been dead these fifteen years.
>
> Yours,
> Ben

"Do I have to?" Danny said again.

"Your Pa figured you ought to. What's so funny, son?"

Danny had been smiling. "I'll bet Clint Carmody was here already," he said, still grinning.

"What makes you say that?"

"It's your face," Danny said. "Nobody could beat up a man like that, except Pa and Clint. Pa's dead. Maybe it would be all right with you if I went and found Clint and lived with him. Clint said it was all right."

"How old is Clint Carmody?" Milt asked his nephew.

"I don't know. Twenty-eight, maybe."

"If he keeps on like he's been going, he won't see thirty. This country's changing, Danny. People want to live in peace and raise their kids that way. They'll fight to do it and even die to do it. They don't want men like Clint Carmody around."

Danny made a face at him. "You trying to tell me Clint is no good?"

"Yes."

"Then you're saying Pa was no good, too."

"Your father was all mixed up."

"I don't think I want to live with you. I'm fifteen."

"We'll take it one day at a time," Milt said. "You're going home with me now."

A stranger walked over to where they were talking and said, "Are you Sheriff Stoker?"

"That's me," Milt told him.

"You keep away from me, you no-good sneaking rat!" Danny cried. "I'll kill you." He was suddenly kicking and waving his arms and struggling so much that Milt could barely hold him.

"What's the matter?" Milt demanded.

"It's a shame," the stranger said. "You really can't blame him, though."

"That no-good rat is the sheriff from back home," Danny said, biting the words off one at a time and still struggling to get free. "He killed Pa."

SHERIFF DODSON offered his hand, but Milt didn't shake with him. He had heard of Sheriff Dodson, the man who had shot his brother. Dodson was a good lawman, they said—even-tempered, reasonable, not trigger-happy. Still, you don't shake hands with the man who killed your brother.

"What are you doing down here in Big Bend?" Milt asked Sheriff Dodson.

"Running, I guess," the other man said. He was shorter than Milt, and wore a trim moustache and Eastern-tailored clothing. "I figure to head on south into Texas, Sheriff. You see, Clint Carmody and his boys swore they'd get me."

"Then you're asking for trouble," Milt said. "Carmody and his boys are here in Big Bend now."

The color drained from Dodson's face. "When does the stage leave?" he asked.

"Not for three or four hours," Milt said.

Dodson shuddered as though it were cold there on the hot, sunny, dusty main street of Big Bend. "I didn't turn in my badge to die down here," he said. "What am I going to do, Sheriff?"

At that moment the rig from McGraw's boarding house came clattering down the street. Eileen McGraw reined to a stop at the stage landing, smiled at Milt, and nodded when she saw Danny standing next to him, not struggling any more.

"I thought you might like a ride back," she said.

"Is she your wife?" Danny asked.

Eileen's face colored. "No," she said. "I'm only a friend, Danny."

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"I'm not married," Milt said. "Danny, why don't you go back to the boarding house with Miss McGraw? You can clean up and have something to eat. I'll join you there later."

"All right, Uncle Milt," Danny agreed, tossing his clothing bag up into the rig. A moment later Eileen had turned the rig, and was heading back down the street with Danny.

"I'd like to stay with you until the stage leaves, if you don't mind," Dodson said.

Milt didn't answer him at once. Instead, he asked, "Exactly how did you kill my brother, Sheriff Dodson?"

Dodson licked his lips nervously. "I know what they're saying—that I shot him from behind."

"I asked you," Milt said.

"It was the bank in the county seat up north, Sheriff. We got word they were planning a job. I was waiting with some deputies and the United States Marshal. We got them on the way out. You can ask the Marshal if you want. He's in Tooker now, I think."

"You say you got word?"

"I got word."

"Who told you?"

"We never found out."

"Just how did you get word?"

"It was an anonymous letter."

"Can I ask the U. S. Marshal that?"

"Sheriff Stoker, all I want is protection until the stage leaves Big Bend. I didn't know Carmody and his boys were here."

"I was thinking, if you got word it must have been one of the gang. Nobody else would have known."

"Maybe," said Dodson.

"Can you figure any other way?"

"Not right off."

"I got to look after my nephew."

"He's wild, that boy—like his father. You be careful with him, Sheriff. He lived with the Stoker gang."

"With my brother."

"He never had a mother. It makes a difference."

"Well, I'm going over to the McGraw boarding house," Milt said.

"I'm coming with you, Sheriff."

So this was the way you did it because you were a lawman. You protected your brother's killer from your brother's friends.

IT WAS cool inside the McGraw boarding house, and so dark you couldn't see anything but shapes and shadows until the memory of the sun left your eyes.

"Danny must have eaten like a horse," Milt said.

"Why, Danny isn't here. He said he changed his mind and wanted to meet you on the street and walk back with you," Eileen said.

"We didn't see him."

"You couldn't have missed him, Milt. That's funny."

"It's not funny," Sheriff Dodson said. "That boy hates me, Sheriff. He must have gone to find Clint Carmody and tell him I was here with you."

"Just why does Carmody want to kill you so bad?" Milt demanded.

"That's a strange question. Me and the deputies got your brother, and cut the rest of the gang down in half."

"You got half the gang, then left the county. That doesn't figure, either."

"He threatened me."

"I had a talk with the Marshal in Tooker a couple of weeks ago," Milt said.

"What about it?"

"He said how Carmody and Ben were getting ready to split up. He said Ben wanted to stay up north because they knew the territory, but Carmody figured they'd be better off operating down here. Naturally Ben wouldn't want that, me being sheriff."

"I don't follow you."

"Someone told you about the bank job up in the county seat. It could have been Carmody."

"That's crazy."

"No, not crazy. Was Carmody at the bank?"

"I didn't see him there."

"Look at it this way. Carmody and my brother have a fight. Carmody decides to get rid of my brother, but Ben's good with a gun and, anyway, the boys like him—"

"No. Wait a minute." Dodson was mopping his brow with a folded handkerchief. "I

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remember seeing Carmody there at the bank."

"Before you said you didn't."

"I remember now. Yes, he was there."

"Make up your mind."

"He was certainly there. Positively."

"This is how I figure it," Milt went on slowly. "Carmody must have decided to get the law to take care of Ben. So he told you about the holdup, and kept the boys he could trust away from the bank when you and the Marshal were waiting there."

"Are you saying I did a thing like that?"

"Yes," Milt said. "It can't be proved. You can't go to jail for it, anyway. Now Carmody's got the rest of the gang with him, including those who escaped from the bank. He'll kill you on sight, because he's afraid the gang might find out that he arranged for you to kill Ben. Isn't that right?"

"He's gunning for me because of what happened to the gang, that's all."

Milt grabbed Dodson by the lapels of his jacket and pulled him close. He could feel the man trembling. "You're a fool, Dodson," he said. "Carmody had to keep you quiet permanently. He scared you and told you to clear out of the county seat, figuring you'd take the stage south. You fool, he's waiting here in Big Bend to kill you!"

Suddenly, Dodson was loose and formless, like jelly. Milt thought that if he let go of him, Dodson would collapse. He shoved Dodson roughly away from him and watched him fall back into a chair, where he sat huddled over, hands supporting his face, elbows resting on his knees.

"What am I going to do?" Dodson moaned softly. "You've got to protect me. It's only for a few hours, Sheriff."

Milt looked at him without speaking.

"Please," Dodson said. "Please, you've got to."

This was the man who had killed his brother, the man who had been paid by the law-abiding people of the adjacent northern county to protect their homes and businesses and range. This was his opposite number, north of the county line. This was the man who, by his thoughts and actions, had made Danny hate him, Milt, without knowing him. A weariness gripped Milt deep down inside. All at once he knew why the lawman, even the lawman who tried to do his job the best he could and maybe died trying, was so often disliked.

"I'll see you safely on the stage," Milt said.

A thin figure entered the parlor from the sunshine outside. It was Danny. He waved a hand at them and whistled and said, "I'm ready to eat now, Miss McGraw."

"You went to Carmody, didn't you, kid?" Dodson said.

Danny looked at Milt and said, "Do I have to talk to him?"

"I'd like to know too," Milt said.

"To know what?" Danny said.

"Where Carmody is. If you saw him. What you told him."

"I was just walking around, Uncle Milt. Is that breakfast ready now, ma'am?"

Eileen went off into the kitchen and called back over her shoulder, "I'll let you know, Danny."

Danny kept whistling and whistling.

THE old man at the window inside the stage office kept whittling away at the whistle he was making. "That's the third time you asked," he told Dodson. "The stage leaves in ten minutes now."

"I told you there was nothing to worry about," Milt said.

"I'm thinking about after I get on the stage."

"What do you want me to do, go all the way down to Mexico with you?"

"I'm not going to Mexico."

"I'll see you on the stage, that's all."

Danny said. "Maybe we ought to be going now, Uncle Milt."

"You can if you want. I didn't ask you along."

"I wanted to come and see what happened."

"There," said Dodson. "You heard him. Something is going to happen. He saw Carbody, I'm telling you."

"Uncle Milt sure saw Clint last night," Danny said. "Look at his face."

Dodson noticed the fist-wrought damage for the first time. "You see why I had to leave my home?" he asked Milt. "Carmody did that, didn't he?"

"Carmody and a few of his boys."

"He wouldn't need any help," Danny said.

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"Next to Pa, Clint was the best man with a gun and his fists I ever saw. Uncle Milt, I'd still like to go and live with Clint."

"That's impossible," Milt said, pulling his holster around to where he could draw the six-gun quickly from his thigh.

"I'd just like to, that's all. He's the most like Pa of any man I know."

The old man inside the window of the stage office puffed out his cheeks and pursed his lips to blow into the willow whistle he had fashioned. The shrill noise made Dodson jump. The old man caught Danny's eye and tossed the whistle out through the window to him.

"Here you are, son," he said.

Danny caught it and blew. "Hey, that's all right," he said. He blew it again.

"Stop that noise," Dodson said.

Outside, the horses had been harnessed to the stage, and the lead pair were pawing eagerly at the dusty ground. It was hot even here on the board sidewalk, in the shade of the overhanging second story of the stage office. It was so hot out on the street that you could see the heat waves shimmering and making the air dance.

"We'd better wait inside," Dodson said.

"Stage is ready now," the old man told him.

The driver and the guard, who had been lounging around inside, came out now. The guard carried a long-barrelled Winchester. The driver wore a beard and was carrying a strongbox under his arm. The other passenger, Mrs. Carmichael, who was going south to visit her brother in Texas, came outside and waited while the driver let down the little ladder so she could climb into the stage.

Dodson said, "Well, thank you, Sheriff."

Danny was blowing on his whistle and knocking the spit from it on his hand, and smiling.

"I told you there was nothing to worry about," Milt said to Dodson.

"It's what happens after I leave town that I'm worried about now," Dodson said.

A man made his own bed, Milt thought. Dodson had done nothing really unlawful, but he would probably carry the fear to his grave even if it were thirty years and a thousand miles away.

Dodson left the boardwalk and started walking toward the stage.

A rider came galloping hard down the street, one hand holding loosely the reins of the spotted pony he rode, the other hand streaking down toward his holster. Milt recognized him—it was Clint Carmody. He came galloping fast between the boardwalk and the stage, so close that Milt could smell the lathering horse before he started choking on the dust its hooves sent billowing up.

The man leaned over in his saddle and fired once, then kept going. Dodson yelled horribly, and Milt was sure he'd been hit. But a moment later Dodson climbed up the ladder and tumbled into the stage.

"Can we go, Milt?" the driver asked.

The rider was still galloping, almost out of sight now, in the opposite direction.

"You can go," Milt said.

Danny looked after the retreating horseman. "There goes a man," he said. "A real man like my Pa."

Milt was running for the hitchrail. He could still see Carmody, a small dot manufacturing dust clouds at the far end of town. Milt found a big, good-looking bay and vaulted into the saddle. He reined around, spurred the bay, and set off at a hard gallop after Carmody.

MILT had been riding for an hour now, hot and dusty in the saddle. He had given the bay its head and found it was a good mount, and fast. The distance between him and Carmody had been cut in half, he figured. He saw Carmody lean around in the saddle and fire at him. He wasn't in range yet, but would be soon, at the rate he was moving.

He had decided half an hour ago not to kill Carmody.

What made a man turn bad, as his brother had? There were a lot of things, Milt thought, a lot of small intangibles which didn't mean much taken one at a time, but which added up when viewed together.

But there was something else. There was the one big thing, the fork in the road. You came upon it suddenly, in unexpected ways. You reached a certain point, and either you

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went this way or you went that way. Now Danny had reached that fork.

Milt had to bring back Carmody and make him tell Ben's boy—his boy now—the truth.

Carmody fired again. Milt was in range now. He hunkered down low behind the bay's neck and found himself saying, "Come on, boy. We can take him."

The spotted pony Carmody rode was a fine animal, Milt thought. He hated to do it, but he aimed carefully at the flank of the pony and squeezed off a shot. At first he thought he had missed, but then the pony's neck went down and its hind legs kicked back and up at the sky. Carmody jerked clear of the saddle before he could be thrown.

The pony fell over on its side, three legs thrashing, the right hind leg still, whinnying piteously. Milt's bay thundered down on it too quickly and tried to turn and wheel away, throwing Milt with the unexpected motion.

Milt landed on his shoulder and scrambled quickly to his feet. But his left ankle gave and he fell again, face down in the dust.

Carmody said, "Just keep squatting there."

Milt didn't move. He was on all fours and found he couldn't bring any weight to bear on his left foot.

"You're Stoker, aren't you?"

Milt looked up slowly and saw Carmody standing there. He was tall and sun-dark, and his good white teeth flashed when he spoke. He was better looking than Milt, and women would find him attractive. Boys like Danny could worship him unless they learned what was behind the flat blue eyes.

"Yeah, you're Stoker. You look like your brother."

Milt stood up suddenly, flinging a handful of sand in Carmody's face. Carmody mouthed a curse and backed away a dozen steps. He was too smart to shoot when he couldn't see. He was rubbing at his eyes furiously. Then he pointed his six-gun at Milt, squinted, and fired, as Milt charged him.

The bullet slammed into Milt's shoulder, sitting him down. A wave of pain and weakness engulfed him, but he lifted his own gun and said, "Don't reload it, Carmody."

Carmody squeezed the trigger and they both heard the click as an empty chamber spun under the hammer.

"Six," Milt said.

Carmody started walking toward him.

Milt got up. He could hardly stand. Carmody reached him and brought his hands up quickly toward Milt's six-gun. Milt warded him off with his left hand, which he could barely control, and slammed the barrel of the six-gun across Carmody's face. He let Carmody lie there, then walked over to the whinnying pony and shot it.

He found a lariat rope and a canteen fastened to the saddle horn. He splashed water in Carmody's face and got him on his feet, then bound his hands and trailed out the lariat behind the bay. Then he climbed into the saddle himself and started on the long, slow ride back to Big Bend.

HE WAS in bed and comfortable, and the doctor was just leaving. "You just lay there and rest," Eileen said.

But Milt was looking at Danny. "You heard it. He told you before they took him off to jail, son—how he sold out your father to Sheriff Dodson." Dodson must be sweating and cringing in some town south of here, Milt thought.

"Yeah," Danny said, but he'd hardly been listening. The fact was there and he knew it, but now there were more important things. "You went out after him, Uncle Milt—just you and him. You were wounded, but you brought him in like a stray, on the end of a rope. Man, Uncle Milt! That was something to see."

Milt laughed. "I couldn't see anything much myself by then."

"I thought you figured me for a stray and wanted me hog-tied and all."

"I just want to take your father's place."

"And teach me to ride and fight like that?"

"Maybe," Milt said. "I don't see why not."

"Only if there's time," said Eileen boldly. "Milt Stoker, I want to help you raise this boy."

Milt was suddenly too drowsy to argue. Eileen had had him in mind like that a long time, he knew. He squeezed her hand and said, "Could be."

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OUT OF THE CHUTES

IN THE LAST issue we attempted to prove that truth is stranger—or at least as fascinating—as fiction, when we told you about rodeo cowboy and judge Carl Dossey, who was killed trying to save his son's life.

Since then we have come upon another story, as tragic in its own way though not as unusual, which happened not long ago in Dayton, Ohio, where an old woman was found dead in a cheap rooming house.

She seemed to be just another old woman who had lived out her span. None of her neighbors who had known her alive, and none of those who saw her dead, guessed at her glamorous past.

They knew her name, Lula Parr, but who among them was old enough to remember her as the star of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show? Who could recall the greatest lady bronc-rider and sharpshooter of them all? No one, apparently, in that neighborhood in Dayton.

And Lula Parr never told them, except by leaving behind some of her treasures. In one poor battered trunk, searchers found a white fringed buckskin costume, soiled now and stiff with age, but obviously expensive and beautiful in its day. There was a white sombrero to match.

That was puzzling enough to those who went through the trunk, but the next find was even more astonishing. It was a pair of .45 caliber pistols, polished and oiled, ready for use—all but the loading. At last the answer came. Down in the bottom of the trunk was Lula Parr's scrapbook, full of yellowed clippings telling about her past successes. Then it came out that the poverty-stricken old lady had had a brilliant past—one that she prized so highly she kept it secret, or one that she cared so little for that she didn't bother to mention it to her friends.

To go on to happier topics, we've just found where a bulldogger can go to win fame and fortune once he gets tired of the rodeo ring. Instead of wrestling steers, he may find it more profitable to wrestle people.

Rodeo fans in the Dakotas got the feeling they'd seen those muscles before, when they watched some wrestling bouts lately. And sure enough, the guy who looked familiar was Orv Carlson, who used to call at the pay window regularly in Northwest rodeos to collect on his 'dogging and bronc-riding efforts.

Now, as you might guess, he's known as Cowboy Carlson, and advertised as a terror, because of his past with bulls. As a top-hand friend of ours pointed out, the pay for wrestling people may be good and the work may be easier, but the hours sure are longer. In rodeo you wrestle the bull down as fast as you can, but on TV you string it out as long as possible to satisfy the video fans.

And speaking of rodeo performances branching out, we've heard a rumor that Casey Tibbs is trying out the contract field. He is working on a trained horse act, has a California booking agent, and will accept a few engagements this year.

The selling point is that Casey will compete in the regular bronc-riding events in any rodeo that books his act. This gives spectators at a small show, where the purses are too low to appeal to the champion bronc-rider of them all, a chance to see him in action.

And as for Casey, he can't lose. He gets paid for his act, and he'll likely pick up some loose change in competition.

The only drawback we see to the whole scheme is when we look at it from the point of view of the local, non-champion bronc-riders, who probably won't be exactly delighted to find themselves in the same go-round with Casey Tibbs.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

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The Vengeance Riders

by Jack Barton

Before he could react in any way, Clara's arms were around him. . . .

THE STORY SO FAR: Banker GEORGE STACEY shoots RUSS BRANDON for raping his wife, CLARA. Stacey's friend TOM McVEY shields him, refuses to reveal his identity to the revenge-seeking Brandon clan. JESS and LUKE BRANDON beat up McVey, make him angry enough to shoot it out with the head of the clan, MATTHEW BRANDON. Injured, Brandon promises to leave McVey alone. Meanwhile Stacey, still out for revenge against the Brandons, hires rustler JAKE RIORDAN to drive off their cattle, and begins maneuvers which ruin the Brandon Cattle Company financially. McVey has fallen for LINDA BRANDON, Russ's widow, and at her urging consents to talk to Matthew Brandon and HAL EVERETT, president of the Brandon Cattle Company. But he is furious when he thinks Linda is playing on his love for her to get him to reveal the identity of the killer.

PART THREE

McVEY slept in the XO bunkhouse that night and in the morning ate breakfast with the XO hands. Except for a few who eyed him with resentment or curiosity, they ignored him. Tip Ryan evidently had spread the word that McVey was here on Linda's invitation, and so the crew felt that he was to be tolerated.

He was first to leave the cookshack. He returned to the bunkhouse for his blankets, then went to the corral and roped and saddled his dun. He tied the blanket roll behind the

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saddle cantle, mounted, turned across the yard.

The half-dozen hands were coming from the cookshack now, Tip Ryan turning toward the main house, where Matthew Brandon stood in the doorway. Brandon merely nodded in reply to McVey's good morning. Seeing nothing of Linda, McVey assumed that she was still abed. He rode past the house and away from XO headquarters.

The sun was just beginning to show above the eastern rim of the prairie, and the night's chill was still in the air. After several hours of traveling at an easy lope, McVey reined in where the road topped a rise. He took out makings and rolled a cigarette, glancing back along the road as he lighted up.

He saw two riders about a mile behind him. He watched them for a long moment, in a speculative way. Now, as they saw him halted on the rise, the pair turned off the road and headed east across the range. There was still a question in McVey's mind, however, a suspicion as to what they were doing.

He rode on, after a few drags on his cigarette, holding his horse to a walk. After traveling a couple more miles, he again halted and looked back. The two were closer, about a half mile behind but some distance from the road.

He too left the road, heading due west. After about ten minutes he glanced back, and now he no longer needed to speculate. They too had changed directions. They'd crossed the road, were aiming west. They were following him—on Matthew Brandon's orders, he was sure. The idea was for him to lead them to the man whose identity Brandon needed to know. McVey smiled wryly. He would lead them nowhere except on a wild goose chase.

He did not try to lose them during the morning. That would have been all but impossible, anyway, in this prairie country where a man had a view of the range for miles in every direction. But when the sun was directly overhead McVey turned southeast.

He avoided ranches along the way, and swung wide of other riders he sighted. He was gradually working his way toward Riverbend now, but without letting it appear to be his destination. At mid-afternoon he recrossed the road that led to the town, and aimed for the Dragoon Hills.

The Dragoons rose in a craggy, serrated range only a half dozen miles from Riverbend. Many of its slopes and ridges were thickly timbered, and there were countless small valleys and narrow gorges within the range. It was rough, broken country in which a man could easily vanish from sight.

He looked back just before entering the hills, saw that the two XO men were still sticking like burrs. They'd shortened his lead to perhaps a quarter of a mile. That was the last he saw of them, or they of him.

Within the Dragoons, he came to a little lake where he'd once picnicked with Clara. He halted to let his horse drink. He had a smoke, then rode on through the dark pine forest until, following the lake shore, he was south of the water. He made his way into a narrow gorge, and at its far end dismounted. He settled down to wait for nightfall, sitting with his back to a boulder.

RIDING on at full dark, McVey found his way from the hills and struck out for Riverbend. He felt a small satisfaction in having shaken the two XO men, in having outwitted the still crafty Matthew Brandon. But he became aware of a reluctance growing within him. He'd given his word to Linda, and he would keep it.

But he began to think that, not only would nothing come of his having a talk with George Stacey, but it was apt to be an unpleasant meeting. He knew that Stacey would resent his coming to talk for the Brandons. The fact was that the two of them no longer saw eye to eye. Something had happened to their friendship. Indeed, something had happened to George Stacey.

It was a little past eight o'clock when McVey crossed the river bridge and entered Riverbend. It was a Saturday night and the town was bustling. The deadfalls at the lower end of Main Street were doing a land-office business. The doors of the redlight dives wouldn't stop swinging all night, McVey knew.

As he neared Lil Shannon's place, Jake Riordan came from it with a girl on each arm. He turned toward the Frisco Bar, but, seeing McVey, he halted and called to him. The

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rustler was duded up like a prosperous rancher at a cattlemen's convention, rigged out in a brown broadcloth suit with a flowered vest, fancy boots, and a tan Stetson—all brand-new.

Riordan called, "It's old 'Honest Abe' McVey himself. Come over here, bucko, and let the girls see what an honest man looks like."

Swinging over to them, McVey saw that Riordan had been drinking heavily, but he had the thought that the man might be as drunk on his new prosperity—that came of running off Brandon cattle—as on whisky. He reined in, pushed his hat back off his forehead, and folded his hands on his saddlehorn. He smiled.

"Having yourself a time, eh, Jake?"

"Yep. This is my night to howl. How do you like what I've got me here?"

McVey looked at the painted women. They met his gaze with a brassy boldness. He said, "You've got one more than you need, Jake."

"I can handle them both. Not only that, but I can afford them."

"Sure, you can afford them. You're sitting pretty these days. You can even ride into town without worrying that somebody will put a rope around your neck."

"That's right. Everybody's real friendly toward Jake Riordan these days."

"Everybody but the Brandons, maybe."

Riordan's grin faded. "The Brandons haven't got a thing on me, McVey," he said, "unless you've been shooting off your mouth to them. And if you have, bucko, I wouldn't like that a little bit."

"Jake, don't threaten me."

"You've been talking to the Brandons, haven't you?"

"Now, Jake honey," one of the women said, "don't you start anything."

Riordan swore, pulled away from them. He grabbed the reins of McVey's horse. "Don't figure you can roll me in the dirt now like you did once," he shouted. "I'm asking you, McVey, and I want an answer. Have you been talking to the Brandons?"

"I've talked to them, but your name wasn't mentioned."

"You're lying!"

"Jake, you're too jumpy. You're so scared of the Brandons your nerve is gone." McVey's voice turned harsh. "Don't call me a liar again, friend. If I'd talked to the Brandons about you, I'd tell you so. Now turn my horse loose."

"Maybe you'd better say what you did talk about to that crowd."

"Jake, turn my horse loose."

"Not until you say what's up between you and the Brandons, bucko."

McVey said, "All right, have it your way," and jabbed spurs to the dun.

The horse leaped forward and slammed against Riordan, bowling him over, scattering the two painted women and the men who'd been drawn by the rustler's loud talk. McVey wheeled the animal about, saw that Riordan was flat on his back. The rustler lay there dazed for a moment, then levered himself up on his left elbow and thrust his right hand inside his coat. Sure that Riordan was about to draw a gun, McVey jerked his own revolver from its holster and brought it to bear on the man.

"Don't Jake," he said. "Just don't try it."

Riordan swore, but withdrew his hand with a weapon. He shoved himself to a sitting position, then got his feet and came erect. His face was ugly with rage.

"Collect your chippies and go where you were headed," McVey told him. "Like you said, it's your night to howl. So go ahead and howl."

One girl had disappeared, but the other tugged at Riordan's arm. "Come along, Jake. You're picking on the wrong man."

Riordan let her draw him away, but he had to have the last word. Over his shoulder, he said, "That's twice, McVey. You won't ever roll me in the dirt again. I'm done fooling around with you."

McVey said, "Sure, Jake, sure," and kept his eyes and his gun on the men until Jake went into the Frisco Bar. Then he rode on to O'Leary's Livery Stable.

AFTER stabling his horse, he went to midtown and had a late supper at the Welcome Cafe. From there he went to the Stacey's house, where Clara answered his knock and admitted him. Clara had a sullen look. She tried to smile but couldn't.

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"George is away, in Cheyenne, if it's he you want to see," she said. "He'll get back on Tuesday's stage."

"Too bad. I came all the way from the Reservation to see him."

"It must be important. Is something more wrong?"

"The Brandons got in touch with me, Clara. Russ's widow, actually. She wanted the same thing again—the name of the man who killed her husband. But now the Brandons want to find him because they're being ruined. Clara, George has gone too far. All they need is his name. They know that one man is behind their trouble."

She turned from him, seated herself on the sofa. "I know that," she said bitterly. "I know it better than anyone. He's gone too far in too many ways. There's no getting along with him any more, Tom. We fight all the time. The longer it goes, the more he blames me. I'm getting fed up. Sooner or later I'll have to leave him."

He frowned. "That's not the answer," he said. "He's your man. You can't just walk out on him because things have gone wrong. You and I have to bring him to his senses."

"I've tried. I've done everything a woman can do to get him to treat me decently. Nothing worked. I'll tell you something, Tom. . . . he won't touch me any more. He blames me so much that it's made him hate me."

"Well, that's your problem," McVey said. "I can't help you with it. But this other thing scares me. The Brandon girl threatened to start looking for the woman who was the cause of Russ's death. She said she'd ride from ranch to ranch and question every woman she found. It wouldn't take her too long to discover that you were visiting your father's ranch last spring, just before Russ was killed. Then she'd come asking questions of you, and I doubt that you could lie to her."

"I'm not afraid of her."

"Not for yourself, maybe. But you'd better be for George."

"I've reached the point where I can no longer concern myself about George Stacey."

He shook his head. "Don't be like that," he said. "If Linda finds out that you're the woman, she'll know that your husband killed Russ Brandon. Then she'll send Luke and Jess Brandon gunning for him. I'll stay in town until George gets back from Cheyenne, and then you and I will have to try to reason with him."

"You, maybe," she said, "but not I."

"Clara—"

"Besides," she cut in, "nobody can reason with him. He hates the Brandons so much that he's begining to hate everybody. Nobody can stop him from ruining the Brandon crowd. You'll see."

"Still, I'll try," McVey said. "I'll see you when George gets home."

He turned to leave, but her "Wait, Tom!" halted him at the dorway to the hall. He turned. She got up from the sofa, said, "Don't go. Stay with me, Tom."

He stared at her in utter disbelief. "Clara, you don't mean that."

She moved toward him, her sullen look gone. Her eyes were bright now, her cheeks flushed. "Ever since things went wrong between George and me," she said, "I've had you in my thoughts. Tom, the truth is . . . I should have married you. You're my kind. You understand me. I'm lonely. I need someone. Stay a little while. Nobody will know."

"Clara, you're George's wife. I can't forget that."

"But if I weren't his wife?"

"Are you planning to divorce him? You'd do that?"

She nodded. "Would it make a difference to you?"

He said, "Clara, I don't know," and left the house.

He headed back to midtown, intending to take a room at the Wyoming House. He tried to put Clara from his mind, but could not. She worried him. Things were bad enough for George Stacey, but she seemed determined to make them worse.

He still had her in his thoughts when he reached the hotel, but he was not so preoccupied that he failed to notice the rider who came running his horse along from the west end of Main Street, from the redlight section, and then headed out of town by way of South Street. It was Jake Riordan.

McVey turned and stared after the rustler until the darkness swallowed him up. He

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wondered why Riordan had decided that this was not his night to howl, after all. It occurred to him that the man might really believe that he had been named as the one who was running off the Brandon cattle, and that fear of the Brandons had driven him away from Riverbend.

It was a crazy, mixed-up world, McVey thought as he went into the hotel. Everyone was full of hatred, suspicion, or fear.

McVEY loafed through Sunday and Monday. He slept late, lingered over his meals, wasted time in the Territorial Saloon. He was waiting for the stage on Tuesday, hoping that George Stacey would arrive on it. If he did not, the next trip in from the railroad would be on Friday. McVey didn't want to hang around town that long.

Early in the afternoon on Tuesday, he noticed from the hotel porch that Hal Everett had come in from XO Ranch. The man drove in by horse and buggy. He left the rig at O'Leary's stable, then walked to midtown carrying a valise. He came directly to the Wyoming House and climbed the steps, his questioning gaze on McVey.

He asked, "Any luck, McVey?"

"Haven't seen my man yet."

Everett frowned. "Why not?"

It was not a time for the truth, so McVey skirted it. "Matt Brandon had a couple of his riders trail me," he said. "I lost them, but I'm waiting to be sure they don't tag along when I ride out again. I'm not leading them to the man."

"I didn't know Matt pulled such a stunt," Everett said. "It was a fool thing for him to do. He should have known you'd spot anybody following you. But all the XO hands were at the ranch when I left there early this morning. You don't need to worry about being trailed now."

"Then I'll leave tonight to see my man."

"Well, I hope some good comes of your seeing him," Everett said, "but I'm not counting on it too much. I'm going to Cheyenne to make an attempt at finding out who is buying up the Brandon Cattle Company stock. I'll stay until I do find out, and then it will be up to Matt Brandon to do something about him." He went on into the hotel.

The stage arrived shortly before three o'clock, and George Stacey was one of the half-dozen passengers that climbed from it. He was pre-occupied and did not notice McVey on the porch of the Wyoming House, before which the stage discharged its passengers.

Stacey waited impatiently to retrieve his traveling bag from the luggage boot, then went off toward the Riverbend Bank. McVey waited until the stagecoach had taken on its outbound passengers and got a hitch of fresh horses and pulled out. Then he went to the bank.

Stacey was in his office at the rear, in conference with elderly Thad Nasmith, his one employee. He frowned with annoyance when McVey appeared.

McVey said, "I've got to see you, George. It's important."

Stacey dismissed Nasmith with a nod, then leaned back in his chair and lit a cigar. His clothes were still filmed with dust from the stage road, and he needed a shave. It seemed to McVey that his friend had changed physically in the past few months; he was thicker through the body, and his face had taken on a flabby fullness that robbed him of his handsomeness. But if Stacey's body were turning soft, the inner man had crystallized. His eyes mirrored a steel-like hardness of character that had not showed before the Brandon trouble developed.

He said, "Well, what's on your mind, Tom?"

McVey told him of Linda's coming to his camp in the Crow Reservation, and of her threat to start searching for the woman with whom Russ Brandon had been involved. He made it clear that he believed that Linda would carry out her threat and succeed in finding out that it was Clara whom Russ had attacked.

"Then they'll have you, George," he said, "and you won't have a chance of staying alive. My hunch is that it won't be Matthew Brandon who comes gunning for you, but his sons. And nothing will stop them. I know Luke and Jess Brandon. I have good reason to know them. Those two can kill without it bothering them at all."

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Stacey wasn't impressed. "So what do you expect me to do?"

"To keep Linda from trying to find the woman," McVey said, "I promised to talk to you. All the Brandons want, George, is for you to let up on them. I'm asking you to do just that—not for them, but to save your life."

"I'm not convinced the Brandon woman will carry out her threat," Stacey said. "Even if she does, there's no certainty that she'll discover the woman Russ attacked. There must be two dozen women on ranches around here. I can't see her asking each of them such a question. Besides, what's to lead her to my wife?"

"I think she'll get around to Clara," McVey said, "and she'll know that Clara is the woman. But if she doesn't, there's something else. Hal Everett, the man who's now head of the Brandon Cattle Company, left on the stage just now to go to Cheyenne to find out who's buying up the company stock. That's you, George."

STACEY shook his head. "I'm working through a proxy, and he's not going to tell Everett that he's acting for me."

"You're not just trying to ruin Matt Brandon," McVey said, accusingly, "you're trying to wreck the Brandon Cattle Company, then take it over. Right, George?"

"That's right," Stacey said flatly. "In the beginning I merely wanted to ruin that crowd. Then I realized that I might as well profit at the Brandon's expense. Yes, I'm going to take over the Brandon Cattle Company, then kick the Brandons out of it."

"When you take it over, they'll come gunning for you. You won't be able to keep your identity a secret then. Another thing—you've given Jake Riordan a free hand to run off Brandon cattle. How are you going to stop him when you control the company?"

Stacey puffed on his cigar, smiling in a smug way. "I'll handle both the Brandons and Riordan when the time comes," he said. "I'm going to bring the law onto this range, Tom. The day I acquire sufficient stock to take over the Brandon Cattle Company, there'll be a deputy United States marshal on hand to protect me and my interests."

McVey shook his head. "You think of everything, don't you?"

Stacey chuckled, but his laughter wasn't a pleasant sound. "I told you once that I would play dirty," he said, "so don't be surprised now." Then, his voice harsh, he said, "I can hate with the best, Tom. I began to hate the day I found out about Russ Brandon and my wife. A Brandon robbed me of something precious."

"He paid," McVey said. "You saw to that."

"Not enough," Stacey said. "Every time I see a Brandon or hear that name mentioned, I remember what Russ Brandon did to me. I won't quit remembering until I've driven them off this range for keeps. That's how it's to be, Tom."

McVey nodded. "I suppose so," he said. "But I still think you're going to trip up. And if I'm right. . . . well, I doubt if any lawman can save you." He turned to leave, then faced about. "George, give it some thought. Ask yourself if it's worth risking your life for."

Then he walked out of the bank, and a few minutes later rode from town.

It was close to midnight when McVey reached XO headquarters, but, late as it was, a lamp burned in the parlor of the main house. As he entered the ranchyard the door of the house opened, and he saw Linda there. He swung over, dismounted.

Linda said, "I've been waiting. I hoped you might get back tonight." She stepped back inside so that he could enter. "You saw the man?"

"Yes."

"And it did no good?"

"Like I told you."

They faced each other in the parlor, and Linda said, "Now I've got to do something on my own."

"Give it up, Linda," he said. "It's not your fight. Don't do what's in your mind. If you should find the woman, it would only bring more hurt to you—and to her. Let Matt Brandon fight his own range war. You're no Brandon. You stopped being one when Russ was killed. Break with this crowd. Make a new life for yourself."

"I can't imagine another life."

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"There's one for you with me."

She shook her head. "I know how you feel toward me, Tom, but I have no such feeling for you. I loved my husband. My memory of him is too strong for me to think of belonging to another man. I'm sorry if that hurts you."

He broke in, "Quit it, Linda. Don't live with a ghost. A woman like you—" he reached for her, drew her into his arms—"can't live alone. You've got to let yourself be what you were meant to be."

She tried to free herself, but he held her to him. He found her mouth with his lips. She stopped trying to break away; she was submissive in his arms, but there was no response. He felt somehow defeated, and so he released her.

"I can't even hope, Linda?"

"Tom, forget me."

"I've tried that. It won't work."

"There can never be anything between us."

"Because of Russ," he said bitterly. "Just as if he were still alive." He saw pain in her eyes, and wished he hadn't spoken so harshly. "Well, I can wait, even without hope. And if you ever decide to let yourself be a woman again, you know where to find me." He walked to the door, then said, "Don't waste our lives, Linda. Don't throw away what could be good years."

She did not answer.

He turned and went out, mounted his horse, and turned it toward his own ranch.

HE SLEPT late in the morning, and it was nearly noon when he finished breakfast. The day was gray and wet, and he decided to wait until the rain let up before setting out for Deer Creek. He went to the barn to water and grain the dun, then saw, when returning to the cabin, two riders with a pack-horse approaching from the west hills.

When they drew closer he recognized them as Luke and Jess Brandon. He stepped into the cabin, re-appeared with his Winchester. He had no intention of letting them get the jump on him this time.

He halted them at the edge of the yard. "That'll be far enough."

Reining in, they sat their horses in silence. McVey recalled Hal Everett's saying that the pair had been out prowling for a long time, trying to cut rustler sign, and now he could believe it. They were wolf-lean. Their hair was long, their faces bristly with beard. Neither man wore a slicker, and their clothes were sodden. They looked for all the world, McVey found himself thinking, like a couple of animated scarecrows.

"You two want something?"

"We ran out of grub yesterday," Luke said. "Figured we could get a handout to keep us going until we reached XO."

"All right. Put your horses in the barn. Leave your guns with them."

They looked at each other inquiringly, then nodded. They went off to the barn, then reappeared on foot and without their gun rigs. McVey followed them into the cabin, sat on his bunk with his rifle across his knees, told them to help themselves.

Luke added kindling to the fire and fixed a pot of coffee. Jess took the skillet and started slicing bacon into it. Then, while the bacon was frying, he mixed batter for flapjacks. McVey rolled and lighted a cigarette. When the grub was ready, the two ate it while standing by the fireplace. They wolfed it down. They drank coffee until the pot was empty. Afterward they washed up pots and pans and dishes.

Luke said, "Obliged, McVey."

"Even-Steven," McVey said. "I had a meal at XO the other day." He rose, still holding onto his rifle. "Any luck cutting rustler sign?"

Jess shook his head, and Luke said, "We know the rustlers take the stolen stock out into the badlands, but we didn't find more than a couple of cold camps. They've got a hideout ranch somewhere in the back country, but we couldn't locate it."

"Maybe you'll have better hunting next time."

"Yeah, maybe," Luke said, and moved to the door.

"We'd have better hunting if some of the hombres who fancy themselves honest men would help," Jess said. "You for one, McVey."

"There's one way you Brandons could keep your cattle safe."

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Both stared. Luke asked, "How?"

"By gathering them and moving them off this range," McVey said. "By now you Brandons should know every other rancher on the Powder wants your outfit elsewhere."

That got him a black look from each, and then they stalked out. He watched from the cabin doorway as they rode off toward XO headquarters a dozen miles away, and he was surprised to find himself feeling a little sorry for them.

The rain stopped that night and the next morning was bright and warm. Still McVey postponed his return to Deer Creek until he asked himself, that afternoon, what am I waiting for, anyway? He had to admit it; he was hoping that Linda would come to him, that she'd had time to think over what he had said and to decide that she should break with the Brandons and start life anew with him. But he knew that it was a false hope, and so, at mid-afternoon, he saddled up and rode north.

Late the following day, as he neared Bar Z Ranch up near the Montana line, he saw a rider coming toward him at a steady lope. He soon recognized the man as Len Burroughs, an employe at the Crow Agency. Burroughs waved as recognition was mutual, and swerved to meet McVey. They reined in facing each other.

The Agency man said, "Glad I spotted you, McVey. This saves me a long ride. I was on my way to your ranch."

By now McVey knew that something was wrong at Deer Creek. He said, "What's happened?"

"Rustlers. They made off with your steers."

"And Al Henry?"

"He's at the Agency infirmary with a bullet hole in his right side," Burroughs said. "But he's well taken care of and he'll be all right. He asked Major Benson to get word to you. He said you're not to worry about him, but to get some help and go after the rustlers."

ACCORDING to what Burroughs told McVey, the rustlers had run off the steers the night before last, while Al Henry was asleep. Since they'd managed it without waking him, Henry had thought that the thieves were Crows. It had been raining that morning, when he found the steers gone, and so there was little sign; but by mid-afternoon he'd sighted the rustlers and discovered that they were white men.

He'd trailed them at a distance, trying to figure out where they were taking the steers; he'd planned to get help at the Agency, once the rustlers camped, and try to recover the cattle. But he'd been spotted. The rustlers hadn't made a night halt, but two of them had dropped behind and ambushed Henry.

He'd managed to make a getaway, even though wounded, and had then set out for the Agency. A couple of Indian police had found him about five miles from the Agency, just after dawn this morning.

Burroughs ended up, "Al said to tell you that he figures the thieves are headed into the badlands by way of Squaw Gorge."

McVey nodded. "Did Al get a look at them?"

"Yes. He said that it was Jake Riordan and his wild bunch."

McVey's face turned stony. "So I figured," he said. "Well, I'll get some help and try to catch up with them. Thanks for coming after me, Len."

Burroughs said, "I was glad to do it." He told McVey again not to worry about Al Henry, that the wounded man was well taken care of, and then he turned back north.

McVey remained there for a little while, thinking about it. He understood why Riordan had taken time out from raiding the Brandon herds to run off the M Bar V steers. It hadn't been because the rustler was having difficulty finding Brandon cattle. Riordan had wanted to pay him back for what happened between them in Riverbend Saturday night, and perhaps because he really believed that McVey had betrayed him to the Brandons.

Coming to a sudden decision, McVey turned back the way he'd come. He headed for XO Ranch. He hadn't any choice. With the Powder River ranchers having given Jake Riordan a free hand, McVey knew he could expect no help from them. He could get help only from the Brandons.

By keeping on the move most of the night, McVey reached XO headquarters at break-

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fast time. Linda admitted him to the ranch-house and led him back to the kitchen, where Matthew Brandon stopped eating to stare at him.

Brandon said, "Well, what brings you here?"

McVey said, "Matt, I'm ready to throw in with you against the rustlers. They raided my camp on Deer Creek, put a slug in my hired hand, ran off my steers."

Brandon's bearded face turned scornful. "So now the boot's on the other foot," he said, his voice heavy with sarcasm, "and it pinches. Why should I help you get back your cattle? It may not be the same bunch of thieves who've been running off XO cattle."

"It's the same bunch."

"How do you know?"

"My hand, Al Henry, got a look at a couple of them," McVey said. "One man he saw was Jake Riordan, and Riordan is ramrodding the wild bunch that's been raiding your herds."

Brandon nodded. "That's on the level, anyway," he said. "Luke and Jess found that much out—that the crowd running off my stock is led by a hombre named Riordan." He scowled at McVey, still reluctant to be friendly. "Can you find them?"

"Yes. I know which way they're headed."

"How many in the bunch?"

"Not more than we can handle," McVey said. "You've got six riders besides your sons. With you and me, that's ten good men."

Brandon shook his head. "I started Luke and Jess back to Texas yesterday morning to look after the ranch down there. So that makes only eight."

"That's enough."

Brandon said, "All right," and now there was a gleam of hope in his eyes. He finished his coffee at a gulp, rose from the table, took his hat down from a wall peg. "How long will it take?"

"A couple of days at least," McVey said. "Maybe a week. We'd better pack along grub and camp gear. We'll stay out until we catch up with them."

Brandon nodded. "Let's go."

Linda said, "Tom—"

He turned toward her, saw that she was pleased and excited. "Yes, Linda?"

"I'm glad you came here for help," she said. "I'm glad that nothing I said the last time you were here kept you away." She was smiling at him, and her eyes were aglow. "Have you had breakfast?"

"No."

"Sit down and I'll fix something for you. You needn't be in so much of a hurry that you set out on an empty stomach."

"Well, thanks."

Brandon had paused at the door, and now looked from one to the other. He said sourly, "What's all this? What did you say to him the last time he was here, anyway?"

She avoided his eyes. "Nothing, Dad," she said, low-voiced. "It wasn't important."

McVey said, "It is important, Matt. I'm willing to have you know. When I was here last, I let Linda know that I want her for my wife."

He hadn't expected the old man to be pleased, but he hadn't anticipated the savage look of rage that twisted Matthew Brandon's craggy face, nor the harshness of his voice as the Texan said, "I'll hunt rustlers with you, McVey, but I'll see you dead before I let you turn this girl's head. She's a Brandon, and, by damn, she's going to stay a Brandon!" He jerked open the door, gestured angrily. "If you're hungry, you'll eat in the cook-shack—not here in my house. Now move!"

Linda cried, "Dad, please!"

McVey said, "It's all right, Linda," and strode past Brandon and out of the house.

IT WAS night again, their third in the badlands. They'd come through Squaw Gorge, across a torturous stretch of lava beds, and now rode silently through some low sage hills. Within the hills lay a small valley. McVey, scouting ahead, had spotted it from a high ridge at sundown.

He'd seen the cattle on the range, far too many cattle for so little graze. He'd marked the log buildings half hidden by some tall old willows and cottonwoods along a creek, and decided that it was a ranch where no honest man—unless he were a hermit—would have lived. It was too deep in the back country, too far across rough terrain.

This then must be a hideout ranch, a place

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where rustlers could hold stolen stock while waiting to find a market or while altering brands. He'd found it by chance. If he'd not climbed that particular slope.

He'd returned to where Matthew Brandon and his XO hands had gone into camp, and said, "I've found them. We'll move in on them under cover of darkness."

It was a black night, and they could see no lighted window to mark the location of the ranch buildings as they entered the valley. McVey reined in, halted the others by holding up his hand.

To Brandon he said, "We'll go afoot and surround the place. There's a cabin, a lean-to barn, and a corral among the trees."

Brandon's reply was a nod. He'd spoken hardly at all to McVey since his angry outburst in the kitchen of the XO ranchhouse. His knowledge that McVey wanted Linda to marry him was a festering sore with the old Texan. It seemed to McVey that Brandon had never hated him so much as now.

They dismounted, leaving Chick Evans as horse handler. They moved warily toward the clump of trees, and soon made out the shapes of the crude buildings. Brandon sent his five men out to get behind the place, then he and McVey crept toward the front of the cabin.

They were still a hundred yards from it when a dog started an excited barking. Brandon swore softly. McVey dropped to the ground, his rifle at his shoulder. The cabin door opened and a shadowy figure stepped from it, and shouted at the dog. The animal gave a final yelp and then was silent. The man stood about twenty feet from the cabin, evidently peering about and listening intently.

McVey glanced at Brandon, and the Texan nodded. McVey began crawling.

When he'd covered perhaps ten yards, the man by the cabin yelled edgily, "There's somebody prowling around here, Jake!"

Another man came from the cabin, then two more.

McVey called, "Riordan, this is McVey! You hear me, Riordan?"

There was no direct reply, but startled yells lifted, and there was a panicky scurrying about of shadowy figures.

McVey tried again, calling, "You're ringed, Riordan! Don't pull anything or we'll cut you down! Give up, man!"

He got a reply this time, the blast of a gun. He fired at the muzzle flash, and beside him Brandon opened up with his six-shooter. A couple of the XO men at the far side of the buildings opened fire. A half-dozen guns cut loose from the buildings. This flurry of shots lasted for perhaps a full minute, then there was a moment of quiet.

It was broken by a scared voice shouting, "Kelly's stopped a slug, Jake! He's dead!"

Another voice, equally frightened, said wildly, "Give up, Jake! You'll get us all killed!"

Brandon had reloaded his gun and now opened fire again, his men joining in from farther away in the darkness. The rustlers returned the fire; at least, several kept shooting. But now there was a drumming of hoofs, and a horse and rider raced away from the corral. He had traveled about fifty yards when an XO man's slug tore him from the saddle.

For several minutes after the rider's flight was cut short, there was heavy sniping by each side. Then again there was a drumming of hoofs. This time the corral emptied of horses. McVey saw that there were nearly a dozen broncs in the bunch, and for a moment he thought that all were riderless.

Then he heard a wild shout, as a man hanging from the side of one animal tried to keep the lot of them at a gallop. McVey recognized the voice: Jack Riordan's.

Riordan hauled himself upright in the saddle now. McVey drove a shot at him but missed. The rustler's mount was in the middle of the bunch, and the man was a difficult target.

McVey called to Brandon. "That's Riordan. I'm going after him."

He rose, ran toward where Chick Evans held the horses.

It took him perhaps five minutes to reach his group's mounts, pick out the XO broncs he'd ridden on the manhunt, swing to the saddle, and lift it to a run. By then Riordan was lost in the darkness, but he'd headed north through the valley, and McVey rode in the same direction.

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BACK at XO, he'd swapped his done-in for this horse, a stocky gray gelding, and it had a lot of bottom. The gray carried him to the end of the valley range in a few short minutes, then through a narrow gap in the hills. Once through the gap, he pulled up and listened. The shooting had ended at the lower end of the valley, and in the taut quiet he caught the distant beat of hoofs. Riordan was ahead of him, riding out onto the lava beds.

McVey too headed into the lava, but now his hope of catching the rustler was fading. It was too black a night for him to catch sight of his quarry, and now even the sound of hoofs faded. Riordan not only had a good headstart and the darkness to hide him, but also the advantage of knowing the country. McVey rode into the wasteland, however, and not until dawn, after many miles of blind searching, would he admit that his man had escaped him.

When he got back to the rustler valley, at mid-morning, McVey saw that Brandon and his riders were rounding up the cattle scattered over the little range. He saw too something that brought a frown to his face. Two captured rustlers had been hanged by the XO men. The bodies hung from the limb of a willow tree near the log buildings.

He felt that the punishment was too severe for the crime of rustling, but then he reminded himself that Matthew Brandon was a desperate man trying to stave off ruin—and that the Riordan crowd had tried to kill Al Henry. It wasn't difficult to convince himself that the crime was something worse than cattle theft. But Jake Riordan, the man who should have been shot down or hanged, had made good his escape.

The cattle were being drifted toward the north end of the valley, to be trailed through the gap in the hills when the rounudup was completed. The two XO pack horses were staked out near the gap. The hands had made a camp there and kept a fire going. There was a pot of coffee on the fire.

McVey dismounted, and filled a tin cup with coffee. By now Matthew Brandon was approaching. The Texan did not dismount. Despite the success of the raid, he was no friendliner toward McVey than before they had found the rustler hideout.

"You let Riordan get away?" he demanded.

McVey said, "I didn't let him. I tried my best to ride him down."

"He's the one we should have strung up," Brandon said sourly. "Still, only one man besides him got away. He's got no wild bunch nay more. Three of them are shot dead and two are hanged. That should finish him."

"Don't count on it."

"You think he'll get another band together, after what's happened to this one?"

McVey drank his coffee, then took out makings for a cigarette. "Matt, I doubt that this was his whole crowd. I'd say that Riordan has as many more, at some other hideout. I don't think this was his main hideout. It's too far in the back country.

"Riordan is a sporting man, and the chances are that he holes up most of the time close to a town where he can have himself a time every now and then. For all I know, he may hang out near Riverbend. But I'm sure of one thing—that he's not finished. In fact, the two of us can expect him to make plenty of trouble for us from now on, because he's a man to hold a grudge."

"Well, what are we going to do about him?"

"There's only one thing to do," McVey said. "Keep after him until we get him."

Brandon nodded. Then he said, "Your steers are here, along with about three hundred head of XO cattle. You want us to drive them out of the badlands in one bunch?"

"We might as well," McVey said. "Once I've got my M Bar V steers outside, I'll hire some hands and trail them to the railroad."

Brandon said, with some bitterness, "You're lucky to have some beef to ship," and rode back to help with the gather.

THEY were twelve days on the trail, after the cattle were brought out of the badlands and McVey had found four men to help him with the drive. Two of the four were good cowhands. One was a teenaged kid who handled the cavvy, which consisted of eight spare horses. The fourth man was an oldtimer hired to do the cooking and, since McVey owned no chuckwagon, handle the pack animals.

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By nightfall of the day of their arrival at Grove Junction, on the railroad, McVey had sold the steers to a buyer for the Kendall Commission Company of Kansas City. Payment was in the form of a draft on any of the Stacey banks.

McVey carried enough cash to pay off his hands. One of them, Ed Scott, agreed to stay in his hire and return the cavvy and pack animals to M Bar V Ranch. After delivering the cattle to the stockpens and paying off the trailhands, McVey put up his mount at the livery stable and walked to midtown.

He stopped in the barber shop for a haircut and a shave, then went to the Drovers' Hotel for supper. After his meal, he drifted into the hotel bar. The Junction was crowded with cattlemen and cowhands, this being the height of the shipping season, and McVey saw quite a few Powder River men.

Most who came face to face with him returned his greetings, but he noted a decided lack of friendliness toward him. It was evident that word had gotten around about his having joined Matthew Brandon in raiding Riordan's hideout. He wondered sourly if they believed he should have let the rustler keep his steers. He ran into Pat Higgins, and the old man was friendly enough.

Higgins bought him a drink. He had money in his pocket and was feeling good about it. He told McVey that he'd trailed in yesterday with three hundred thirty-seven steers, and had gotten a good price for them.

He said, "I'd be enjoying life right now if it weren't for this other trouble."

"Clara and George?"

"Yeah."

"They're still not hitting it off, eh?"

"Worse than that," Higgins said. "Clara's left George and come home to stay." He shook his head worriedly. "I can't savvy my own daughter, Tom—or that son-in-law of mine, either, for that matter." He sat lost in troubled thought for a time. Then he said, "There's been a lot of talk about your throwing in with the Brandons, Tom—not that I believe it, of course."

"I haven't thrown in with them," McVey told him. "If Riordan hadn't run off my

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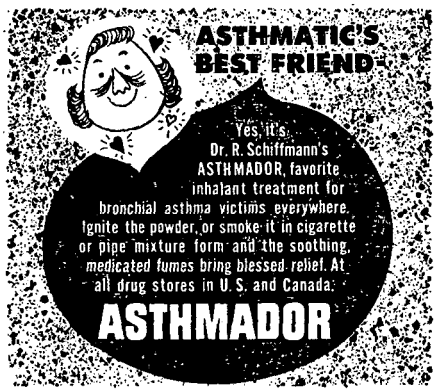
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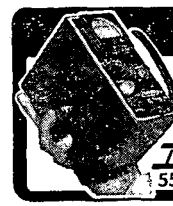

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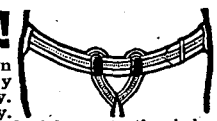

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cattle, I wouldn't have needed help from the Brandon outfit to get them back."

"I figured that. Have you heard that Riordan is making big talk about fixing both you and Matt Brandon?"

McVey shook his head. "Nobody's told me," he said, "but I figured that he'd try to even the score with us. Where's he been doing his talking?"

"Here in the Juncton. He was in town when I got in yesterday. He'd gotten hold of some Powder River men and was telling them that you'd thrown in with the Brandons. He'd been drinking, and he was feeling proddy. But he wasn't just talking when he said that he'd fix you and Matt Brandon. Have you ever heard of a man named Vince Mardin?"

"I've heard of him," McVey said. "I know him too. He's a professional gunman. If there's range war between Montana and the Mexican border, he's sure to turn up and hire out his gun to one side or the other. Why? What about Mardin?"

"Riordan met the westbound train yesterday afternoon," Higgins said. "Mardin got off, and they shook hands like old friends."

McVey was jolted. "You sure it was Vince Mardin, Pat?"

"It was Mardin, all right," Higgins said. "It looks as though Riordan made enough money stealing and selling Brandon that he can afford to hire that killer to do his dirty work for him. You'd better sleep light and watch your back trail from now on."

"I'll do that," McVey said, at the same time thinking that Matthew Brandon should be warned.

McVey spent the night at Grove Junction, then took the trail north at mid-morning. He overtook Ed Scott at noon and joined him in herding the cavvy and the pack animals. Four days later, nearing McVey's ranch, they ran into Tip Ryan and another XO rider. McVey gave them a message for Matthew Brandon, a warning that Riordan had brought Vince Mardin into the country and that the two of them might be marked for bushwhacking.

After passing on the warning, the two XO riders left.

McVey and Ed rode on.

ONCE back at the ranch, McVey left Scott there to hold the place down while he made the long trip up to the Crow Reservation to visit Al Henry at the Agency. Henry was making a slow recovery from his wound, and it would be another two weeks at least before he would be able to leave the Agency infirmary. He was in good spirits, however.

When McVey returned to the Wyoming ranch, Ed Scott asked for his money. He was an Oregon man, and he wanted to return home before winter set in. Before leaving, he told McVey that there'd been a visitor two days before—a man who asked for McVey but didn't state his business. Scott's description of the visitor fitted Vince Mardin. A sense of uneasiness came to McVey.

The coming winter was something to think about and prepare for. Provisions should be stocked, a supply of firewood laid in. McVey put off the trip to town for provisions, but he did sharpen his ax and start cutting wood.

There was a sizable windfall in the grove of trees along the nearby creek. He would snake a dead tree in from there at the end of his catch-rope, behind a horse, and do the cutting behind his cabin. He would trim off the branches, split the trunk, chop kindling of fireplace size, and stack the wood against the wall of the cabin.

He was still at his woodcutting when, toward noon of the third day, he saw a rig approaching from the southeast. The rig was a buckboard, and Clara Stacey was handling the team. He watched her with a puzzled frown as she drove into the yard. Clara was smiling as she reined in the team, and her manner suggested that there was nothing strange about her coming to visit him.

"Well, aren't you going to give me any welcome at all?" she said. "You might at least pretend you're glad to see me, considering how far I've come to see you."

"Clara, I'm too busy wondering why you've come."

"I'll tell you, if you'll help me down and invite me inside."

He stepped forward, lifted her from the buckboard. She swayed against him as her feet touched the ground; for an instant there was an invitation for him to take her in his

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arms. He ignored it and stepped back, eying her warily.

She was dressed more suitably for a train trip than for one by buckboard across cattle range. She wore a brown coat with a fur collar, a jaunty little hat, kid gloves. And she did look attractive, McVey had to admit.

"I left Dad's ranch yesterday afternoon and spent the night at Gorman's place," she said. "I've been driving steadily since seven o'clock this morning. It's a long way to come to see a man, but since I lost all hope of your coming to me, I had to make the trip." She turned suddenly grave. "I've got to talk things over with you, Tom."

"All right. Go inside. I'll put up your horses, then rustle up a meal."

He led the horses over to the barn, unhitched them there. After removing their harness, he turned them into the corral. When he entered the cabin, he saw that Clara had made herself at home. She'd removed hat, coat, and gloves, placed them on his bunk, and now was seated on one of the benches at the plank table.

The thought crossed his mind that this was a poor setting for Clara. She no more belonged in a back-country ranchhouse than a precious gem belonged in a brass ring. It was a warm fall day, so he left the door open. He went to the fireplace to start a fire so he could cook a meal for them.

Clara said, "You know I left George, don't you, Tom?"

Without looking at her, he said, "I saw Pat at Grove Junction. He told me."

"I'm not going back to him."

"You've made up your mind, have you?"

"I have. I've written to a lawyer in Cheyenne, and he says that I have grounds for divorce. I'm to go to Cheyenne to talk to him."

"You're going?"

"That depends on you."

HE TURNED to stare at her. "On me?" he said. Then he added, "I won't pretend I don't understand. You want me to tell you to get the divorce." He shook his head. "Clara, I don't like your making me the cause of your divorcing George."

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"Do you mean that you don't care?" she said. "I'm in love with you, Tom—and well, you were once in love with me, and could be again if you'd let yourself be."

"You're not in love with me, Clara," he said flatly. "You're not in love with anybody except Clara Higgins Stacey. The trouble is, things went wrong for you and George because of what happened between you and Russ Brandon. George had suspicions that you were as much to blame as Russ, and so that ruined your marriage.

"Now you want to get out of it, but only if you're sure that another man—me—will take George's place. If you're not sure of me, you won't go through with the divorce. You'll keep your hold on George and hope to patch things up. Don't tell me that you're in love with me, Clara."

Quick anger twisted at her face, then she let herself show mere hurt. Tears welled in her eyes. She said, "You're wrong, Tom, terribly wrong."

As though not wanting him to see her crying, she rose, walked to the door, and stood looking out.

He said, to her back, "I'm not trying to hurt you, Clara. I'm just trying to get you to see yourself. George mistreated you—for reason, he thought. You think that I'd be kind to you. Maybe I would be, if I wanted you. But would you want the sort of life I could give you? This place would be mighty lonely for you after your two years in Riverbend. You'd better look at this thing from all sides, Clara."

Not looking at him, she said, "You really don't want me, Tom?"

"I'm sorry, Clara."

"You did once."

"That was a long time ago."

She faced about in the doorway. Tears still glistened in her eyes, but there was anger too.

"There's another woman," she said accusingly. "And since there are so few women around here, I can guess who she is—Russ Brandon's widow."

"That's how it is, Clara," he said. "It's Linda Brandon I want."

He saw her anger turn to real fury, and for a moment he expected her to leave. Clara made no such move, however. Her behavior was puzzling to him. She looked outside, then faced about in the doorway. She said nothing at all, merely gazed at him in an oddly calculating way.

He shrugged and turned back to prepare the meal he'd planned to fix for them. He sliced bacon into a pan, stirred up a batch of sourdough biscuits, placed a pot of leftover beans on the fire to heat. When he turned to set places at the table, he found Clara coming to him. A strange, twisted smile was still on her lips. She placed her hands on his shoulders.

"I'd be better for you, Tom," she said. "I'll prove it to you."

Before he could react in any way, she slipped her arms about his neck, pressed her body to his, found his lips with hers. The next instant she stepped back, faced about, and said, "Do come in, Mrs. Brandon."

McVey's startled gaze went to the door, and Linda was indeed standing there.

(To be concluded in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 74)

1. A cattle trail from San Antonio, Texas, to Baxter Springs, Kansas.
2. One whose hips slope too much.
3. When a steer is thrown so that he falls with his feet or legs under him it is called a dogfall, and does not count as a fall until the bulldogger gets him flat on his side.
4. Buffalo loved to scratch themselves on telegraph poles, frequently pushing the poles over.
5. Different streams. The Yampa is in Colorado, the Hassayampa (sometimes called Liars' Creek) in Arizona.
6. Mostly pack mules, occasionally two-wheeled Mexican carts.
7. Several years after 1900.
8. Positions of riders with reference to a trail herd they were driving.
9. Idaho.
10. (1) Cheyenne, Wyo., (2) Monte Vista, Colo., (3) Boulder, Colo., (4) Colorado Springs, Colo., (5) Salt Lake City, Utah, (6) Yuba City, Calif., (7) Topeka, Kans.

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OUR AIR MAIL

(Continued from page 7)

Sportswoman

Dear Editor:

Please print my plea for pen pals, as I am very lonely. I am 21, am 5'3" tall, and weigh 103 lbs. I like horseback riding and fishing. I promise to answer all letters from you guys and gals.

ISABEL DAY

c/o Harvey W. Day
General Delivery
Prineville, Oregon

Three-time Winner

Dear Editor:

This is my third attempt to get into the Air Mail column. I hope I won't be a three-time loser. I'm 16 years old, 5'6" tall, have blonde hair and blue eyes. I like sports and enjoy Western music. My favorite hobby is writing letters, and I promise to answer all mail. So come on, everyone, fill my mailbox.

ELAINE KNITTER

809 Hamilton Street
Utica, New York

Sailor Boys

Dear Editor:

We would like very much to join your Air Mail pen pals. Please print our plea in your magazine. Ronnie is 5'9" tall, and has curly brown hair and blue eyes. I am 6'1" tall, have blond wavy hair and blue eyes. We both like sports of all kinds, and dancing.

MM 2/c JAMES H. POETTKER
MM 3/c RONALD R. DURHAM
U.S.S. Wiseman (DE-667)
c/o FPO, San Francisco, Calif.

Easterner

Dear Editor:

Could an Easterner get into your Air Mail group? I've never been farther west than Gary, Indiana, and would especially like to get letters from any Westerners interested enough to write. I am 18, and would like to hear from anyone near my age. Right now I'm working in Cincinnati, and go home to Rising Sun, Indiana, over the weekend. I'm tall for a girl (5'6"), and weigh 120 lbs. My interests are football, baseball and basketball. I like to write long letters, so don't write me unless you like to get them.

MARY ELLEN NEW

c/o Anna Louise Inn
446 Room, 300 Lytle Street
Cincinnati 2, Ohio

Age Is Unimportant

Dear Editor:

I would like to get into your pen-pal column, so I can hear from folks from any state or nation. I'll answer letters from anyone, anyplace, who cares to write. Age makes no difference. I am 35 years old, and have black hair and brown eyes.

RUSSELL H. BAILES

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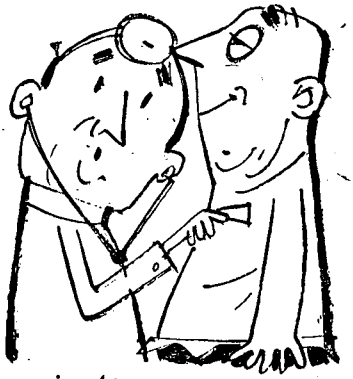

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

MAN OF CANCER
JUNE 21 to JULY 22

THE SIGN of Cancer has for one of its major attributes a strict devotion to home and country. The loyalty of the Cancerian is unwavering to the death. For instance, on June 26, 1876, the 7th Cavalry, under the fearless leadership of General Custer, was completely exterminated by the hostile forces of Chief Sitting Bull.

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Despite the fact that the Cancer man yearns for the security of a home and family, he is often beset by a desire for adventure and a need for excitement before he settles down permanently. Even if he cannot have a home and family of his own, he is impelled into the services which protect those of others—the Army, the Navy, and the Marines, for example.

While the Cancer man is stubbornly proud of his independence, he is at the same time sensitive and sentimental. He has a soft streak, and is always appreciative of any kindness shown him. Here is the man who is especially pleased to have his pipe and slippers brought to him. Because he has built a wall of reserve around himself to protect his sensitive nature from being too often bruised, he is exceptionally responsive to the generous gestures of others.

The Cancerian often wanders far and wide in search of his dreams—and always comes back, drawn irresistibly to his home.

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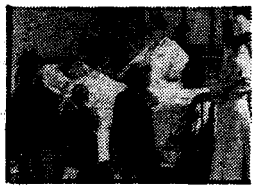

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